

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Professionals' beliefs about contact between children in alternative care and their birth parents.

Thesis

How to cite:

Harris, Rita (1999). Professionals' beliefs about contact between children in alternative care and their birth parents. PhD thesis The Open University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 1999 The Author



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000e264>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

RITA HARRIS
BSc Hons, DipClinPsychol

**PROFESSIONALS' BELIEFS ABOUT CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN
IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND THEIR BIRTH PARENTS**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Open University for the
degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology.**

APRIL 1999

SALOMONS
CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed *P. H. Harris* (Candidate)
Date *26th April 1999*

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed *P. H. Harris* (Candidate)
Date *26th April 1999*
Signed *R. D. Doherty* (Supervisor)
Date *26th April 1999*

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed *P. H. Harris* (Candidate)
Date *26th April 1999*

Declaration of confidentiality

Every effort has been made to preserve the anonymity of the participants in this study. Therefore the names and any information which could identify anyone taking part have been removed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this section I am struck yet again by the generosity of everyone who has had a part in this research and the enriching experience it has been for me.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Rudi Dallos for his good humoured patience, enthusiasm and encouragement. His ability to respond quickly was much appreciated.

I would also like to thank my work colleagues who have created a context in which this research could take place. In particular I would like to thank Emilia Dowling for her encouragement. Special thanks go to Caroline Lindsey who has been inspirational and without whom this research may never have happened.

I would especially like to thank the participants whose openness and generosity with their time and ideas made this such an interesting and pleasurable experience.

My thanks go to my parents, who have always been there.

Finally I would like to thank my own family, who have gone away at week-ends to give me space, and for their patience, tolerance, capacity to contain my anxiety and belief in me. I consider myself very fortunate.



Library authorisation form
DClinPsychol

Please return this form to the Assistant Director (Registration and Conferments), Open University Validation Services, 344-354 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8BP.

Student: RITA HARRIS .

Validated institution: SALOMONS CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

Degree for which the thesis is submitted: Doctor of Clinical Psychology

Thesis title: PROFESSIONALS' BELIEFS ABOUT CONTACT
BETWEEN CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND
THEIR BIRTH PARENTS .

Part 1 Open University Library Authorisation

I confirm that I am willing for my thesis to be made available to readers by the Open University Library and for it to be photocopied, subject to the discretion of the Librarian.

Signed: Rita Harris Date: 12.10.99

Part 2 British Library Authorisation

If you want a copy of your thesis to be available on loan to the British Library Thesis Service as and when it is requested, you must sign a British Library Doctoral Thesis Agreement Form and return it to the Research Degrees Office of the University together with this form. The British Library will publicize the details of your thesis and may request a copy on loan from the University Library. Information on the presentation of the thesis is given in the Agreement form.

The University has decided that your participation in the British Library Thesis Service should be voluntary. Please tick one of the boxes below to indicate your intentions.

☒ I am willing for the Open University to loan the British Library a copy of my thesis: a signed British Library Doctoral Thesis Agreement Form is attached.

or

☐ I do not wish the Open University to loan a copy of my thesis to the British Library.

Signed: Rita Harris Date: 12.10.99

ABSTRACT

This study explored the beliefs and assumptions that affect professionals in the decision making process about contact between children in permanent alternative care and their birth parents. Nine professionals from three groups, guardian ad Litem; judges and independent experts, were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews. The verbatim transcripts of these interviews were the data for an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Five overarching themes emerged in guiding the work of professionals, which were described as, parental capacity; children's rights and wishes; contact as central to identity; the safety and the age of the child. There were seven other common themes, which were described as, permanency and stability; having an open mind; adoption as different to other forms of permanency; attachment; ethnicity/race/gender/culture; views of alternative parents and power and responsibility. Three themes occurred in only one group or individual interview, and were described as, having differing and conflicting views to others; contact as having a symbolic function and the law as paramount. The guardian ad Litem emphasised the importance of contact as central to identity, and were strongly influenced by research supporting this view. They often felt disempowered in legal proceedings. The experts took a "detached", evidence based position, and were particularly concerned about the safety and emotional needs of children. The judges worked within a legal framework, within which individual differences emerged. The issue of power and responsibility given to certain discourses is discussed. The similarities and differences within and between groups are understood in terms of the different ways in which professionals position themselves in relation to contact, based on professional roles and responsibilities, within a social and cultural framework, and influenced by a range of

professional and personal experiences. Consideration is given to how the themes are played out in discourses used to present and argue a position. A number of tensions and contradictions emerged. Findings were considered in the light of outcome research and a social constructionist perspective, “The co-ordinated management of meanings”. Possible recommendations for ways in which professionals may become more aware of their beliefs and assumptions affecting decision making about contact, are made. The open and thoughtful manner in which professionals responded to the research interview and sought feedback supports the idea that greater openness in the decision making process about contact, between children in permanent alternative care and their birth parents, would be beneficial.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CONTACT	5
THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE	7
<i>Research findings</i>	7
<i>Methodological issues</i>	10
JUDICIAL ATTITUDES TO CONTACT	12
SYSTEMS THEORY	12
MULTIPLE LEVELS OF MEANING	14
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND POWER	15
PROFESSIONAL BELIEFS IN DECISION MAKING	17
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS	18
 RESEARCH AIMS	 19
<i>Research questions/guiding propositions</i>	20
 DESIGN	 22
<i>Rationale for method</i>	22
PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING	23
<i>Sampling issues</i>	24
METHOD	25
<i>Interview schedules</i>	25
PROCEDURE	26
<i>Recruitment of participants</i>	26
<i>The interviews</i>	26
<i>Data analysis</i>	27
<i>Reliability and validity</i>	28
 RESULTS	 30
 SECTION ONE - DATA ANALYSIS	 30
<i>Table 1: Super ordinate themes</i>	31
<i>Table 2 : Other common themes</i>	31
<i>Table 3 : Idiosyncratic themes</i>	31
<i>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</i>	32
SECTION TWO - SHARED THEMES BETWEEN GROUPS	35
<i>Super ordinate themes</i>	35
<i>Other common themes</i>	37
<i>Influences on decision making</i>	38
SECTION THREE - WITHIN GROUP COMPARISONS	40
<i>The experts</i>	40
<i>The guardian ad Litem</i>	49
<i>The judges</i>	59

SECTION FOUR - SUMMARY OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AND WITHIN GROUPS	66
<i>Common Themes</i>	66
<i>Idiosyncratic Themes</i>	68
<i>Influences</i>	69
SECTION FIVE - THE INTERVIEWER	70
 DISCUSSION	 71
 OVERVIEW	 71
DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY	72
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	75
<i>The experts</i>	75
<i>The guardian ad Litem</i>	78
<i>The judges</i>	80
<i>All participants</i>	82
MULTIPLE LEVELS OF MEANING	82
IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH	85
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTISE	86
<i>Further research</i>	87
CONCLUSION	88
 REFERENCES	 89
 LIST OF APPENDICIES	 94

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about contact between children placed in substitute care and their birth parents but most of this is anecdotal, drawing on small scale studies, personal accounts and speculation based mostly on the experience of a “closed model” of adoption. The empirical evidence to support or condemn contact is sparse, although contact seems to be emerging as a factor making disruption of permanent placements less likely. Maintaining contact between parents and children who are placed away from them is now believed to be so important as to be written into the Children Act, 1989 (Department of Health, 1991), and agencies are being encouraged to explore more open models of adoption.

Contact encompasses a range of information and physical contacts between substitute and biological families. Also the types of substitute care is highly varied, ranging from overnight accommodation in a variety of settings to living permanently with an alternative family. The latter may be an adoptive family, the one instance when parental responsibility, as defined in the Children Act, 1989 (DoH, 1991) is removed from biological parents, and long term fostering. Clearly these also represent different experiences for children and both families.

For the professionals involved in making decisions about whether contact between children placed away from their birth parents/relatives should take place, the picture from the research is not clear. There remains ambivalence among some practitioners and adopters about contact and warnings not to see sometimes quite limited studies as carrying too much authority. There is also a complex set of interrelationships between the many systems involved in the decision making process, in which those in more powerful

positions than others may often have the greatest influence. The arguments employed in this process may include theoretical models about child development, evidence from research and statutory responsibilities, all of which may be mediated by personal and professional experiences and beliefs. This study was an attempt to explore the beliefs and assumptions influencing professionals in making recommendations and decisions about contact between children in alternative care and their birth parents. This was thought to be an essential starting point from which to explore how the decisions and the contact itself is experienced by children and families.

CONTACT

Permanence policies, with the emphasis on rescuing children from their birth families, and offering them a “fresh start” featured highly in the 1970's. The emphasis was on the importance of an exclusive relationship with adoptive parents to avoid a child being affected adversely by having to relate to more than one set of parents. Although permanence has figured highly in the child care literature and thinking from the mid 1970's, it was not until the early 1980's that substantial numbers of children were placed with permanent substitute families. Children with special needs or “hard to place”, often had to wait for permanency and typically may have had several attempts to rehabilitate them with many changes of placement (Thoburn, 1990).

In the 1980's there was a growing awareness of the importance of more openness and less secrecy in adoption. These ideas developed from retrospective reports that children's sense of identity seemed linked to their understanding of their origins and a sense of continuity with the past. Triseliotis (1993) and others, had demonstrated the importance to adopted people of knowledge of their origins and the right to birth records. Personal accounts by adopted people of their search for members of their family of origin demonstrated their need for a sense of personal history and identity. However, it should be said that little is known about adopted people who do not come forward or appear to be seeking this information. Therefore the maintenance of contact between members of the birth family and adopted child is a recent development. The degree of contact resulting in three different forms of adoption being available, are summarised below.

“Adoption with contact” is a term used in the UK and North America generally in relation to adoptive or permanent foster families for children with special needs, where meaningful links with members of the birth family are preserved, whilst also providing stability and continuity of care for the children.

“Open adoption” refers mostly to the adoptions of infants. The birth parents are actively involved in hearing about and choosing would be adopters. There are lots of variation in how this is carried out, with the majority of the experience and research in this area being in New Zealand and more recently in the USA. These are reviewed in detail by Joan Fratter (Fratter, 1996).

“Semi-open adoption” is when the agency provides full but non-identifying information to the birth parents and would be adopters, about each other. Birth parents choose from the adopters profiles but no face to face meetings are arranged. The agency does the screening with the birth parents having a degree of choice. Occasionally there is one face-to-face meeting but no exchange of names and addresses. Non-identifying information is passed between the two sets of parents.

Contact is used to describe a variety of forms of direct or indirect communication between a child and a range of people, including birth parents, siblings, grand parents, previous foster parents and others who may have been important in the child's life. It represents a continuum of possibilities ranging from initial exchange of non-identifying information, via the agency, to on going contact in some form, negotiated directly by members of the birth and adoptive family. It encompasses face to face meetings and letters, telephone calls and messages by third parties.

THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

There appears to be a lack of empirical evidence either for or against contact between children in permanent substitute care and their birth families.

Research findings.

In a recent paper reviewing the research on contact Quinton and colleagues (Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes, 1997), indicate that few studies distinguish between de facto and planned permanence. The data from samples of children in long-term foster or residential care show no systematic relationship between contact and placement breakdown; children's emotional or behavioural development or intellectual attainment. There is some evidence that contact arrangements can work fairly well in the placement of younger children, but there are no studies of contact and its effect during adolescence (Quinton et al. 1997).

Different issues emerged in relation to contact in permanent placements made in infancy and those made when children are older. Empirical studies, generally case note and/or survey studies, suggest that permanent placements become increasingly more problematic after the age of two (Fratter, Rowe, Sapsford and Thoburn, 1991). The issues surrounding contact change as children are more likely to retain strong and/or negative memories of their birth parents. There has been a change in thinking about contact with birth parents and children after adoption. This has moved from a position of termination of all contact post-adoption to greater openness in new placements and granting adoptees access to their birth records. The issue was highlighted by Sant's (1964) observation of the "genealogical" bewilderment described by adoptees referred to clinical services. Research in the USA and here highlighted the desire of some adult adoptees for

reunion with birth parents and the continuing distress of birth parents themselves (Triseliotis,1973), although most adoptees only wished for information about their origins, rather than contact. Berry's review of research findings on openness in adoption (Berry, 1991) appeared to demonstrate that open adoption was of most benefit to birth parents, rather than the alternative carers or the child. She highlighted the lack of research on adoptive fathers and their feelings and experiences of openness. She also conducted a questionnaire survey of 1396 adoptive parents in the USA, 1988-1989, on the acceptability of contact (Berry,1993). The response rate was 62 percent. Sixty-nine percent of adoptions were made under 1 year of age and 92 percent under 5 years. About two-thirds of adoptive parents were comfortable with contact, but less than one fifth thought it had positive benefits. The age of the child was not related to level of comfort.

Studies of open adoptions by Dominick (1988) four years post-placement, and Ivanek (1987), 7-11 years after placement, examined open adoptions that involved the birth parents' input to the choice of adopters. They concluded that contact brought initial benefits to adopters and birth parents. Neither measured benefits for the children or included placements with no contact. Only 20% of Dominick's sample were still in contact at four years. McRoy and her colleagues (McRoy, Grotevant and White, 1988), interviewing a small self selected sample of adoptive and birth parents, concluded that adopters and birth parents saw contact as being positive for children and birth parents, but less so for adopters. Children who are placed away from their parents permanently tend to have multiple problems that are not resolved quickly. They have experienced poor parenting, often over many years and suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse and

neglect. Cross-sectional, or even retrospective studies, will not be the most effective way of evaluating the usefulness of contact.

Quinton et al. (1997) in their review of the research on contact conclude that information about their children is important to many birth mothers and that some direct contact can be acceptable to both sets of parents. However, they point out that the studies are of small self-selected samples with high refusal rates and no studies have compared outcomes with and without contact. In their view no conclusion can be reached about the superiority of adoption with or without contact. Joan Fratter (1996) studied a small sample of 15 children with special needs, having a range of type and frequency of contact, four years after the placements were made. Most of the children were beyond toddler stage. This is a longitudinal study, the credibility and reliability of which was enhanced by follow up interviews and sufficiently long gaps to allow for more than first experiences and impressions to be shared. Seventy percent of the adoptive parents were initially positive about contact but the remainder reported tensions and difficulties. This study had a high drop out/refusal rate. She draws attention to the evolving nature of the relationships surrounding contact and how these develop over time. Her study demonstrates how a child centred approach by both sets of parents may be considered to be a good indicator of success in maintaining contact with birth families.

Permanent placements become increasingly problematic as children get older. Issues about contact become more complicated as children are likely to retain strong memories, both good and bad, of birth families.

Most research in the area has looked at the acceptability of contact and its effect on the placement overall. Quinton et al. (1997) in their review, conclude that open adoption

with contact for older children can work well, although Berry (1991) asserts that the greatest gain is for the birth parents. Barth and Barry (1988) compared 57 disrupted with 63 intact placements. In both groups some children had contact with birth families and some did not. Many children (79%) had face-to-face contact. Thirty-one percent of new parents, found contact helpful, 38% did not. Disruption rates were not significantly different between the open and closed adoptions. Control over contact by the new parents appeared crucial in finding it positive. This study is weakened by high refusal rate. Fratter et al. (1991) looked at the effects of contact on the stability of permanent placements of 1165 children. They found that the strongest predictors of disruption were - child's age at placement and whether children showed emotional, behavioural or institutional behaviour. Nevertheless when these and other factors were taken into account continued contact with parents increased placement stability significantly.

There does however appear to be one point on which there is agreement - that substitute parents should have a secure sense of the right to parent. Clearly, given the range of possible factors influencing any permanent placement, each assessment for contact should be made on a case by case basis.

Methodological issues.

The methodological problems in studies for and against maintaining contact are similar and are well documented by Quinton et al. (1997). These include sampling issues - often small or unrepresentative samples are used; lack of prospective research designs; poorly defined measurements of contact; individual differences between subjects in terms of their own attributes as well as the variety of experiences and use of placements, rather than individuals, as the unit of outcome, studies investigating the acceptability of open

adoption have tended to be of small self-selected samples or samples with high refusal rates. Longitudinal studies of carefully selected and representative samples, with reliable measures, are necessary to help begin to unravel the complex set of factors, indicating the appropriateness of contact, and the processes that appear to be linked to “good” outcomes. No studies have yet compared the outcomes from adoption with some form of contact to adoption without contact. The majority of studies have looked at responses to openness when the children were still in mid to late childhood. Studies of later permanent placements have tended to have larger samples but have also tended to rely on case-note data or simple questionnaire measures. The dilemmas in conducting research into such a complex area seem to be that large scale research may not address the subtleties and complexities of each particular families’ experience, yet small, poorly controlled studies, are difficult to generalise from. Cross - sectional studies fail to take into account the developing needs of children and the issues raised at different developmental stages, e.g. adoptive families’ experiences when the child is a teenager as compared to their earlier experiences of him/her as a younger child. However, from the research that has been conducted to date, generally cross-sectional, interview and questionnaire surveys, some themes to guide practice and research do emerge. These include the importance of the age of the child at placement; levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties in the child; attachment relationships; the acceptability or not of contact to both sets of parents and the degree to which alternative carers feel “entitled” to parent.

JUDICIAL ATTITUDES TO CONTACT

The advent of contact orders appears to reflect a major shift in emphasis, with judges seeming readier than before to contemplate adoption with contact. Any contact order made is meant to be in the benefit of the child concerned. Courts are generally reluctant to make any contact order against the wishes of the adopters. When considering how decisions are made in relation to contact it may be that the views of potential adopters will be particularly influential in judicial decisions and important to consider when making assessments.

Once a contact order is made, there has to be provision for enforcement. The context within which it will be carried out, e.g. social services involvement and the feasibility of practical arrangements may also be important in assessing whether an order should be made.

SYSTEMS THEORY

Previous, explanatory models and research often appear to ignore the complex processes involved in making assessments about contact with birth parents. An exception to this is Quinton and colleagues detailed analysis of the first year of placement for 61 children joining new families, (Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes, 1998). Most have attempted to establish linear, causal links between contact and limited outcomes such as placement stability and parental satisfaction. Overlooked is the complex set of interrelationships between the many systems involving the child and influencing decisions about his/her care. These have been highlighted by Caroline Lindsey (Lindsey, 1995a), and include the birth and substitute families, Social Services, adoption agencies and the

legal system. She alerts us to the recursive nature of these, any movement in one part of the system having an impact on other parts of it. The actions that people take will be influenced by the beliefs and ideas they hold. These will include those about the child and the families involved and views about contact and its usefulness. The idea that meaning is dependent on context is therefore important in understanding the ways in which family relationships acquire significance, (Bateson, 1972). As Caroline Lindsey points out (Lindsey,1995b): "In fostering and adoption family relationships are not created biologically, but are brought into being through a series of conversations and interactions, which provide the context for their existence". These conversations clearly involve a wide range of people with differing experiences and beliefs. As outlined by Berry (1991) to adopt requires the psychological ability to become part of a triangle - a family system that includes the adoptive family, the birth family and the child. It requires a capacity to help the child integrate his/her story with a story that evolves in the newly formed family and to accept the child's previous experience. Caroline Lindsey goes on to describe "non-parental parents"- a role ideally taken up by birth parents in which they accept that they no longer have responsibility for parental tasks, but have a capacity for concern and interest in the child and the ability to support the role of the substitute parents. This resonates with Beck's (1994) finding that successful contact appeared to be linked to the birth parents' capacity to assume a non-parental role, and adoptive parents in facilitating this. Perhaps this should be thought of as a rectangle as a fourth position, that of the professionals involved and the views they contribute to the process also need to be considered.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF MEANING

People have many selves, in many contexts, their behaviour being influenced by the beliefs or assumptions they hold about the way in which relationships work. These ideas are maintained or modified via feedback from interactions with others in different situations or contexts. Social constructionists (Gergen, 1985 and Pearce & Cronen, 1980) have taken this idea further by exploring in detail the processes by which way people give meaning to their experiences through social interaction, mediated by language. In contrast to systems theory language is not predominantly seen as just the medium of communication, but as containing a complex set of culturally shared embedded meanings. They recognised that people construct meaning in their lives through multi-layered contexts, which at times may be in contradiction to one another. Cronen and Pearce (1985) propose different levels of relationships which mutually effect one another, e.g. cultural context, family context, relationship context, episode in which an action takes place and the action/behaviour, and so on, in ascending degrees of influence. Each level is influenced by those above and below. The degree of influence is seen in the observed effect. Social constructionism therefore offers a framework for understanding context, the meanings this has for individuals and the relationships which bring it into being and are in turn affected by it. Different professionals are likely to be influenced by the ethics, beliefs, practises and knowledge base derived from their professional trainings; by the ethos of their agency and their personal life experiences. In the case of experts this may include theoretical models such as attachment and systems theory. For guardians a more humanistic, child focussed set of beliefs may dominate. For judges a legal framework is likely to prevail.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND POWER

Much has been written about whose view prevails and who has the loudest or most effective voice in making decisions about people's lives. The court arena and the notion of being "expert" in making decisions about who children should live and have contact with, carry with them a great deal of power and influence, and with it responsibility. Terri Apter (Apter, 1996) is critical of expert positions, as ones in which experts can refuse to move from their own points of view, or narratives, and silence those of less influential individuals. She writes of the difficulties in changing narratives, when the psychologist's voice claims, or is presumed to have, expert status. The assumptions people make about us will influence what they tell us. She reminds us of our responsibility for what we bring forth in conversation. Perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations of this is in care proceedings, where decisions are shaped by those defined as being "expert", perhaps at the expense of views defined within this context as less expert e.g. parents. Apter illustrates vividly how cultural/social narratives influenced how the women responded to her questions and how they experienced their stories being interpreted within a framework of assumptions that marginalised their changing stories. A dominant cultural/social narrative in the area of adoption would seem to be that although contact with birth parents is valued and enshrined in law, adoption is still seen by most as "closed". She warns against the power of being "expert" being misused and reminds us that we need to be aware of the possible effects of our work and on those we interview. We need to observe ourselves at work.

Social constructionism and systemic approaches both recognise that the observer invariably perturbs what is being observed. A social constructionist position (Gergen,

1985), makes it possible to include social structures, and the role of language in shaping what is experienced as real, within the meaning systems of individuals and families.

Foucault (1976) in his exploration of the history of ideas, has made it possible to consider the role of power relations within society, without attributing the intention to exercise power to individuals participating in the dominant discourse. Understanding therefore requires an analysis of the position from which such power is exercised. In particular his questioning of how certain ideas become privileged in certain eras is an important reminder against believing that the final answer has been found.

The absence of an ultimate truth and an awareness that certain people and groups attempt to impose their version of the truth as the only one, seems to be the foundation upon which social constructionism is built. Therefore a wide variety of constructions may be applied to any occasion, often resulting in competition over whose voice prevails. Gergen's (1989) view is that one of the main ways in which "voice" is achieved is through conventions of warrant, i.e. rationales or justifications as to why one voice or option is superior to others. Some versions of events "warrant voice" more than others. This may be because those in relatively powerful positions have the authority and resources to make their versions of events "stick", and are generally skilful and confident discourse users in marshalling discourses to suit their positions, (Gergen, 1989). This is likely to be the case in expert opinion.

Other writers e.g. Potter and Wetherell (1987) emphasise that the implications of what people say go beyond the immediate social situation they are engaged in and are tied in with particular forms of society and social practise. In relation to contact, the judiciary and experts are sanctioned to make decisions about the lives of others.

PROFESSIONAL BELIEFS IN DECISION MAKING.

The arguments put forward against open-adoption appear to focus on interference by birth parents preventing attachments to the adoptive parents and a climate of insecurity with the adoptive parents not feeling in control of the situation. These arguments may well lead experts to be influenced by perceived patterns of attachment and the effects of contact on the adoptive parents sense of security.

The advantages claimed for open-adoption are : Children have the opportunity to ask questions directly of their birth parents, about their background, the circumstances of their relinquishment, and have a detailed medical history. It is thought to reduce the feelings of loss and rejection; avoid unrealistic fantasies about their background and assist in the development of clearer self-images. It has been argued that disregarding earlier attachments leads to poorer outcomes (Hill, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1989). Others claim that for older children, maintaining contact can lead to more stable placements (Fratter, 1991 and 1996, Wedge and Mantle, 1991). These ideas may also result in experts assessing attachments, the meaning of these relationships and how these are managed.

In relation to the birth parents, arguments include : lessening the element of loss; less guilt leading to easier relinquishing of a parental role and less worry about the child. Arguments against include : interference with the child's rearing - destroying their sense of security and belonging, and unresolved mourning. The position of birth parents may therefore be viewed in terms of their ability to relinquish their parental role and support the adoptive or foster carers. For adoptive parents the questions reflect similar issues from another position, in terms of their ability to parent in the context of ongoing contact and whether they feel empowered to do so.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.

As experts we may be seen as skilled discourse users whose views are given sanction and authority by the social contexts we find ourselves in. As such we have a high level of responsibility invested in us, to reflect on our practise and the range of alternative, perhaps less privileged discourses that do not get given “voice”. It seems to be imperative that alternative realities must be continually reviewed, not just those that legitimise and endorse our own views. We need to be reflecting on the effects we and what we represent has on those we assess. Experts may be seen as masters and mistresses of discourse, with well honed language skills, rather than experts in “objective realities”.

The range of information available to experts in this area is confusing and uncertain, with the same evidence being employed to argue for and against contact. This is within a context of legislation, a very powerful context, in which research and clinical practise are being guided by social policy, rather than clear evidence. The positions of professionals on the question of contact, between children in permanent alternative care, and their birth parents, is likely to vary. This may be based on their professional responsibilities and experiences, as well as more personal influences. Broader legal and other social contexts may well play a part, which may include the research conducted within these. How individuals position themselves in relation to contact, and the discourses they employ to make their arguments, are the focus of this study.

RESEARCH AIMS

The overall aim of this study was to develop a greater understanding of the beliefs and assumptions employed by professionals in the construction of decision-making about contact between children in permanent alternative care and their birth parents i.e. an attempt to explore the beliefs and discourses professionals draw on and the relationship between these and the contexts in which they occur.

The study aimed to explore the psychological processes which influence and maintain the views held by key professionals about contact between children in alternative care and their birth parents. Given the complexity of the system, with many levels of context to consider, in which experts operate, the aim of this study was to begin to understand the starting positions of experts in this area. Given the emphasis on individual meanings a comparative study was not considered appropriate. However, experts from three groups, viewed as having different positions in relation to this process, i.e. those offering expert opinion, judges and guardian ad Litems, were chosen. The comparative element within the design aimed to provide a wider or increased understanding of the discourses employed in this area. This study is intended to be the first step in a longer term research project, in which the positions, beliefs and discourses for children, birth parents, alternative carers i.e. foster and adoptive parents and the social workers will also be explored. Having begun to identify the prevalent/dominant ideas employed by "experts", it is hoped to explore whether these are shared by others, and what some of the alternative discourses may be that are perhaps not given "warrant", in the decision making process, yet crucial in the long term outcome.

Research questions/Guiding propositions

Of central interest is the beliefs and assumptions professionals draw on in making assessments and judgements about contact. Although within the chosen methodology no specific hypotheses were stated prior to data collection, there were a number of ideas based on my experience and the literature available that guided the design of the semi-structured interview. These assumptions generated a number of research questions:

1. Assumption - Professionals/experts draw on a variety of beliefs/experiences in assessing and arguing for or against contact.

1. Research question - How are assessments of contact "brought forth" by professionals. What beliefs/experiences do they draw on?

2. Assumption - These beliefs/discourses are influenced by the contexts within which such assessments are taking place and may also have a hierarchical influence on one another.

These may include:

Social/cultural levels of meaning e.g. as demonstrated in the legal framework;

Agency scripts e.g. the agency view of contact and relationship to the other players;

Professional scripts e.g. theoretical models such as attachment theory, systemic theories and those relating to identity formation; Personal scripts e.g. personal experiences; and

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.

2. Research question - Is this a helpful way of understanding the beliefs held by professionals and if not do other discourses/frameworks emerge?

3. Assumption - Professionals will draw on a range of discourses from a range of contexts within which they operate. These may be in contradiction.

3. Research question - Do some contexts appear to be more influential than others and are there contradictions between these?

DESIGN

Rationale for method.

Given the focus on meanings rather than generalisability and in order to address the questions and aims of the study, a qualitative approach was thought most appropriate. Central to this study is an attempt to gain a picture of the beliefs and explanations held by professionals working in this area. Therefore an in-depth study of small samples of experts involved in making decisions about contact between children in substitute care, and their birth parents, was chosen. The study is not comparative, although there was some selective sampling into 3 professional groups, in order to obtain a range of views. This is largely a cross-sectional study, focusing on one interview. It is also collaborative and has a longitudinal element, in that participants were sent summaries of their interviews and their comments on these sought.

More specifically the type of approach chosen was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996 and Osbone and Smith, 1998). From a social constructionist position, the role of the researcher is important as her presence is seen as having an effect on the experience and behaviour of the participants. An assumption in IPA is that meanings are interactional and the position of the interpreter is central, hence the “interpretative” aspect of this method. Within this methodology there is an attempt to understand the world from the position of the “other”, from an observer position. This is in contrast to Discourse Analysis (DA) (Edwards and Potter, 1992), which argues that beliefs vary across inter-personal contexts, which is perhaps a more fragmented view of the self and identity and hence beliefs.

In many ways IPA is quite close to grounded theory. Grounded theory is based on an inductive approach, i.e. theory is generated from data rather than being a reflection of the researcher's view (Strauss, 1987). However, a strict grounded theory methodology was not adopted, since moving from individual experiences to developing generalisations, individual meanings may be lost. Indeed, in an extreme form it may be argued that such generalisations, as with traditional positivistic approaches, may be viewed as representing, objective, external reality (Charmaz, 1995). Some aspects of grounded theory were used e.g. successive coding and generating themes in a systematic way. In this sense IPA is a form of grounded theory, but one which has developed from a psychological perspective. There is a fluidity and evolution of qualitative methods of analysis. In reality many researchers use many aspects of these various methods. IPA connects with these other forms of data analysis but is also being developed as a more robust and independent method of analysis. It aims to make sense of the meanings, events and experiences of the participants involved. It also takes the position of the interviewer into account, in which research is recognised as a dynamic process. This process is circular or systemic, in that the participants' view of the researcher will effect how they wish to present themselves. Generally, attempts are made to examine a small number of respondents in detail, often using semi-structured interviews to explore in depth their responses to a particular topic.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

Three groups of participants were sought, those offering expert opinions i.e. child psychiatrists and psychologists; judges and those acting on behalf of the child, and instructing the experts i.e. guardian ad Litem. Three participants were recruited to each

group, totalling nine. However, this is not designed as a comparative study of three professional groups, but one that focuses on the meanings that guide individuals in decision making, regardless of professional affiliation. These professional groups were chosen because each is seen as having a particularly influential position in the process under consideration. Each appears to approach the question of contact from a different position and may be assumed to be working within differing sets of constraints e.g. judges from case law and the possibility of the court of appeal; experts from professional positions and policies and guardians from the position of being the child's advocate, whilst also instructing the experts.

Sampling issues.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methodologies, given the search for depth and meanings, often involves much smaller samples. The requirements of quantitative research e.g. control and randomisation of the sample, to ensure representativeness and generalisability, are not seen as important as issues of validity in terms of the meaningfulness or applicability of concepts. Hence this is a theoretical sample, participants being selected because they are thought to illuminate the area being studied. This sample included differences in professional backgrounds; position in relation to the question of contact and included men and women. Given their seniority within their profession all were of fairly similar age, but were from a fairly small pool of possible participants. Clearly there are potential sources of error and bias in the sample, in particular those who agreed to be interviewed all stated an interest in the area and motivation to contribute to further understanding of the issues involved. However, these sources of bias may be countered by the validity offered by a thorough exploration of each

participants views in which demand characteristics, participant characteristics and effects of the interviewer become visible. Similarly, although not offering the generalisability of a large sample, this research aims to provide an in-depth examination of the meanings at work (Smith, Harre and Van Langenhove, 1995).

Finally, within this framework an attempt is made to be as transparent as possible via an exploration of how the views of the researcher has structured the way in which the findings are collected, defined and presented. The activity of studying something will always affect it and a reflexive analysis as proposed here should attend to the meanings brought by the researcher to the area under investigation. Throughout the study a research journal was completed (Appendix II) in order to continually reflect upon this process.

METHOD

Interview schedules

A semi-structured interview was developed following the procedure defined by Smith (1985). This involved constructing an interview schedule, covering the broad range of themes or question areas outlined above (research questions). These were put into what seemed to be the most appropriate sequence i.e. any personal influences being put at the end of the interview and a description of each person's context being at the beginning. Questions related to each area were then generated, followed by possible probes and prompts. Questions were phrased in the most open form possible, designed to elicit individuals' own definitions. This was then discussed with colleagues working in the same area and underwent a number of revisions. The final set of questions used for all the

participants was piloted by conducting the interview with an "expert" colleague and her feedback was incorporated into the final version.

Two interviews were developed one for experts and guardians (Appendix III) and the other for judges (Appendix IV), with different questions in relation to the contexts in which they work to ensure face validity. The main difference in these 2 interviews is the section relating to context. In the interview for judges this addresses the type of court they sit in. For the other two groups their contexts were considered to be sufficiently variable to warrant the same open-ended set of questions for both groups.

PROCEDURE

Recruitment of participants

Participants were approached initially by letter, in which the aims of the study, the time commitment, the researcher's profession and role in the study and issues of confidentiality were addressed (Appendix V). This letter was then followed up by a telephone call when questions about the research were answered. If those approached agreed to be interviewed, which all bar one did, the date and time of the interview was agreed.

The interviews

1. The aim of the research was described again, any further questions answered and the confidential nature of the interviews emphasised.
2. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours during which questions were adapted to the specific context and issues which arose were probed.

3. Each interview was audio taped, participants giving signed consent to this (Appendix VI). Ethical approval for the study had been obtained from the researchers place of work (Appendix I).
4. Each tape was then transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for verification.
5. Following data analysis a summary of my understanding of the main themes (Appendix VII) was sent to each participant. This was followed by a 'phone call in which they were invited to comment on this summary. A central aspect of this research was to attempt a collaborative production of data, as well as a respectful approach to participants. It also allowed respondents to disagree with the "expert" researcher, producing more reflective data and a form of respondent validation of it.
6. A summary of the overall findings were then sent to each participant with an invitation to reflect further on these findings if they wished to do so.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed individually using an interpretative phenomenological approach as outlined by Osborn and Smith (1998). This analysis is organised around themes which emerge from the transcripts and are considered in relation to the literature. The procedure is as follows:

1. Interview transcripts were read, and re-read a number of times. Notes were made of potential themes and these were informed by the experience of the interview itself.
2. The text was re-read and any emergent themes identified and loosely organised.
3. The themes were defined in more detail and their interrelationships considered. These broad clusters of themes are not theoretically driven.

4. Some of the texts and emergent themes were also read by a colleague. The themes were then reflected on again, in the light of this feedback.
5. Each respondent was sent a summary of their interview to comment on. Any feedback was incorporated into the final analysis.
6. The themes were then organised into superordinate themes with sub themes within these. The sub themes do not occur in all the superordinate themes as no two individuals are the same. This allows for pattern and shared ideas alongside individual differences. This is not dissimilar to systemic interviewing in which recurrence of themes and interconnectedness is sought.
7. When a group of coherent themes which were interconnected with each other were established, these were considered in the light of the literature available.

Reliability/Validity

Auditability

Two people who had not taken part in the project, each carried out an independent audit of the data analysis, in an attempt to ensure that the account produced was credible and based on the data collected. Each were given the research questions, the interview schedules, an audio-tape, annotated transcripts, codings and initial categories, and a summary of the themes. They were asked to consider whether the interview schedules were designed to address the research questions. They then listened to a recorded interview, read the transcript, the codings and categories from these and then read the summary of the themes. Their task was to check that the conclusions drawn were credible in terms of the data and that a logical progression ran through the chain of evidence, but

not the only or definitive account that could be produced. Each agreed that a coherent chain of argument ran from the raw data to the themes that emerged.

Reflexivity and co-operative enquiry.

Reflexivity is an inevitable consequence of engaging in research with people and can be harnessed as a valuable part of the research. This was carried out in two ways:

a). Respondent validity. Each respondent was sent a summary of their interview and the themes that emerged. Each agreed that these were an accurate and fair account of the views they expressed. Some re-emphasised particular points, which were incorporated into the final analysis.

b). Research journal. In order to provide a reflexive account of the research process a diary was kept throughout the process of data collection and analysis (edited version in Appendix II).

Inter-rater reliability

An independent rater was given six cards on which each of the main themes were described. She was then asked to match 30 pieces of text, from two interviews against these. A Cohen's Kappa coefficient of agreement was then calculated (Appendix VIII) giving a value of 0.80. This represents an agreement of 80%.

Rhetorical power.

The quality of a piece of research should be judged by the extent to which those working in the field are persuaded by the findings. This study aimed to present adequate examples from the analysis to enable the reader to judge its viability in this respect.

RESULTS

This chapter is divided into five sections. In section one the process of analysis is described. In section two five super ordinate themes are described in detail and the ways in which they are used differently by the three professional groups are discussed. Themes common to any two professional groups are also mentioned. In section three the similarities and differences within each group are considered in detail. In section four a summary of the similarities and differences between and within groups is presented. In section five the position of the interviewer is considered by reflecting on the diary kept throughout the period of data collection and analysis (edited version in Appendix II).

In order to convey the tone and complexity of individual narratives, numerous excerpts of the transcripts have been included. For ease of reading, these have been edited, and the participants are not named. Summary analyses of an interview from each professional group are appended, (Appendix IX).

SECTION ONE - DATA ANALYSIS

Overall, 114 themes were generated from the interviews. From these 47 main themes emerged, which could be clustered under five super ordinate themes, seven other common themes and two idiosyncratic themes. During analysis of the data some differences emerged between groups which warranted separating the themes out by groups. This was particularly the case with some of the more idiosyncratic themes. The super ordinate themes, common to the majority of participants, are outlined in table 1. The further seven common themes, present in two professional groups, are outlined in table 2. The more idiosyncratic themes, particular to one group or individual, are outlined

in table 3. Exploration of these themes illustrated how, although apparently very similar, initially, these had different meanings for each participant. From the ways in which these were employed during the interviews, different actions were implied. Therefore the themes may be seen as discourses which are used and operate in different ways according to the position of the participants and the ways in which they wish to present themselves and argue their position.

Table 1 : Super ordinate themes.

Dominant themes to emerge.

- 1. Parental capacity.
- 2. Children’s rights and wishes.
- 3. Contact as central to identity.
- 4. Safety.
- 5. Age of the child.

Table 2 : Other common themes.

Themes to emerge in two professional groups.

- 1. Permanency and stability.
- 2. Having an open mind.
- 3. Adoption as closed.
- 4. Attachment.
- 5. Ethnicity/race/ gender/culture.
- 6. Views of the alternative carers.
- 7. Power and responsibility.

Table 3 : Idiosyncratic themes

Themes particular to one group or individual.

- 1. Having different and conflicting views to others.
- 2. The law as paramount.
- 3. Contact as having a symbolic function.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The process of identifying emergent themes from each individual interview, looking for connections around which these may cluster, leading to the production of super ordinate themes is a form of qualitative analysis, interpretative, phenomenological analysis (IPA), described by Smith and Osborne (in press). The author then searched for themes reflecting shared views for all participants, and then examined the ways in which these were similar and different across and within professional groups, in which patterns, connections and tensions could be explored. Finally I returned to a consideration of the individual meanings and experiences of participants, the role of my own views and experiences and the effect of these on the data collection and analysis. Summaries of the emergent themes for one member of each group are appended (Appendix IX).

To illustrate the analytic process I have presented in detail the process of developing the theme of *Contact as central to identity*.

From an analysis of the interviews I started initially to code the text. This then led to groupings of codes into emerging themes. These were then clustered into main themes, which I was then able to clarify into over-arching themes, within and across interviews. An example of one of these is *Contact as central to identity*.

Stage 1 : looking for initial themes in the first interview.

In the first interview a number of themes emerged which included contact as the most important consideration; the meaning of contact to give a sense of identity; the views of others as being conflicting/unhelpful/undermining; the age of the child as important in decision making as were parental factors, the presence or not of siblings, ethnicity/race

and culture and the children's wishes and the strong influence of particular outcome studies.

Stage 2 : emerging themes.

With further analysis some of the themes began to cluster together, and in this first interview began to emerge as, identity as central and contact being key to this; the importance and limitations of birth parents; issues of responsibility and having differing, conflicting views to others.

Stage 3 : clustering of themes.

As the subsequent interviews were analysed further themes emerged, including stability and permanency of placement; safety of the child; having an open mind; the law as paramount; contact as having a symbolic function and power and responsibility.

Stage 4 : super ordinate themes.

The next stage of analysis was to look for themes reflecting shared experiences of all participants. Throughout this process attempts were made to look at each interview afresh, and, in particular, to keep the coding emergent from the interviews. What characterised all the interviews was the principle of focusing on the best interests of the child. However, the emphasis on what guided assessments of this, varied between individuals, with key clusters such as *Contact as central to identity*, emerging. Other themes occurred only in certain groups or individual interviews. In total *five* super ordinate themes emerged. These are outlined in table 1.

The following examples give a flavour of the theme *Contact as central to identity* :

Guardian 2 "I knew that for an older child, an older child's history will always lie with his birth family and you can't sever it.....and then if you destroy.....take that bit of the child's history away, you're damaging it 's ability to make a link with it's new family" (10.7).

Expert 3. "I'm thinking about adults who have been adopted and who I suspect if they'd seen their parents from a time to time, would probably have felt more complete, than not having done so" (21.3).

Guardian 1 "Contact is important to their sense of identity, the sense of self, all this figures largely in how successful they are in maintaining some integrity of the personality as they get older" (25.7).

Expert 1 "we're not talking about children who had a wonderful life with their parents but who clearly did not feel settled..... anywhere else but, where their origins were" (7.13).

Stage 5 : theme definition

From the interviews the theme of *Contact as central to identity* became defined as follows:

"The underlying principle is that contact with birth parents and relatives is important in developing a coherent sense of self, while maintaining an ongoing relationship; providing information about origins/history and enabling the development of new relationships."

SECTION TWO - SHARED THEMES BETWEEN GROUPS

Super ordinate themes.

The super ordinate themes, common to the majority of participants, appear to be linked to professional beliefs about what they consider to be important and are guided by, in making decisions about contact. There were other important beliefs, which were less commonly shared, which are discussed later in this section. The super ordinate themes were:

1. **Parental capacity**, defined as the ability of the parent to prioritise the needs of the child over their own. This included the birth parents ability to support permanency and the placement. For example :

Expert 1 : “.....if they can actually talk about the child and not talk about themselves and their own problems, that gives me a sense that there is a possibility.....they can think about what’s best for the child and many of them fail that”(9.13).

Expert 3 : “The parent that can convey that they are not supportive of the child’s placement, I think is a contra indication for contact”(5.22).

2. **Children’s rights and wishes**, defined by demonstrating an active concern to ascertain and to take account of the feelings and wishes of the child. For example :

Expert 3 : “I think to overrule a child, is another reason against contact.....the child has to wish for contact to take place”(5.15).

Judge 2 : “the wishes and feelings of the child are first”(12.12).

3. **Contact as central to identity**, see earlier section. Contact with siblings was included under this heading and references to roots and origins.

4. **Safety**, included ensuring the child's physical and psychological safety in relation to all contact. For example :

Expert 3 : “first of all contact has to be safe for the child”(4.20).

Guardian 2 : “where the parent has been abusive or violent, I’m not sure the child should be exposed to that”(43.15).

5. **Age of the child**, when the child's age was central to decision making in relation to contact. For example :

Judge 1 : “if you’ve got a teenage child.....who’s been implacably opposed to contact, it’s then very difficult to order it”(8.8).

Guardian 1 : “the baby’s case was different because of the age”(36.20).

Of these five themes *Contact as central to identity*; *Safety of the child*; *Children’s rights and wishes* and *The age of the child*, featured significantly in all three groups. However the emphasis placed on these varied both within and between groups, with the guardians and one of the judges, placing particular emphasis on *Contact as central to identity*. For the group of experts *Safety* was particularly important, as were *Stability/permanency of placement* (common theme), and the *Capacity of the birth parents* to meet the needs of the child and to support permanency. This was also emphasised by two of the guardians but was absent from the judges’ interviews. *Children’s rights and wishes* were emphasised by all the experts and one of the judges. Although mentioned by the guardians this was not given particular weight. For one judge, the wishes of children below the age of 10 or 11 years, would hold little weight. Although the *Age of the child* was mentioned by all three groups, the meaning behind this generally appeared to be different, within and between groups. Within the guardian group this was

linked to attachment in two instances, but in apparently different ways. For one, a young child with an attachment had a better chance of making a new attachment, whilst for another a young child must have a lot of contact, because of their attachment. For this group and the experts, age, particularly older children was linked to identity. For the judges age appeared to be linked to the views of the child, although for one judge this was in terms of the weight given to these, for another it was in terms of how to ascertain these. *Parental capacity*, in terms of the capacity of the birth parents to meet the needs of the child and support permanency, featured highly for the experts and two of the guardians. It was touched on only briefly by one of the judges.

Other common themes.

Themes that occurred across groups but did not emerge as super ordinate themes are listed in table 2. More idiosyncratic themes, occurring in one group or individual are discussed in Section 3 - within group comparisons. The beliefs of individuals are also described in detail in that section. The other common themes were :

1. **Permanency and stability**, which included both relationships over time and stability of placements. This was very important to the experts and was mentioned by one of the judges.
2. **Open mind**, was defined as beginning from a position of “not knowing” and neutrality and was common to the experts and judges.
3. **Adoption as being different** to other permanent placements, and closed i.e. without contact, occurred in two participants (one expert and one judge), which may be linked to personal influences.

4. **Attachment**, which included attachment of the child to the birth parents, and other carers, and the birth parents attachment to the child was mentioned by both experts and guardians.
5. **Ethnicity/ race/ gender/ culture**, was defined as a sensitivity to and action based on, taking these factors into account. This was only emphasised by the guardian group, with the exception of one expert, rather in passing.
6. **Views of the alternative carers**, was defined as the attitude and feelings of alternative carers being considered to be important in enabling contact between a child and their birth parents to be successful. This was important to the experts and two of the guardians, although others mentioned it in passing.
7. **Power and responsibility**, as a theme occurred in all three groups, but often with quite different foci, and was not considered to be a super ordinate theme. For the experts and judges, when mentioned, it was often in relation to a sense of responsibility for the influence held. The guardians on the other hand often appeared to feel disempowered by the inequality of power they experienced, although their role was clearly an influential one.

It is interesting that although each participant explained their guiding principal as being "child focused" and their role as assessing what is in the best interests of the children, when examined in detail this appears to be understood and acted upon in both similar and different ways, by each participant.

Influences on decision making.

All participants described a range influences on their thinking, including those that were defined as external e.g. constraints of provision, outcome research and the Court of

Appeal. Others defined as internal included personal experiences that clearly had had a major impact on their thinking.

SECTION THREE - WITHIN GROUP COMPARISONS

THE EXPERTS

This group consisted of two child psychiatrists and one clinical psychologist. All have extensive experience in the field and have national reputations as "experts".

The position of all three experts appeared to be one in which each was looking for evidence, in as detached a manner as possible. However, what they focused on and were influenced by were at times similar and at others different. The safety of the child, and stability/permanency of placement featured highly within this group as did the capacity of the birth parents to meet the needs of the child and support permanency. This was central to expert one, for whom the rights of the children were also key. She described a strong sense of responsibility and need to be realistic, and was sensitive to the needs of birth parents. This awareness of the birth parent's position was also the case for the other experts.

For expert two safety appeared to be most important, followed by stability in children's lives. For this expert adoption was seen as different to other forms of permanency and closed.

For expert three, permanency and a secure attachment were her first consideration. She saw contact as having a positive symbolic function in communicating the reality of permanency, dispelling myths and reassuring children about birth parents. However, she also saw contact as being used to avoid the pain and loss of separation. Like expert one, she saw the views of the child as crucial. This expert was critical of what she saw as the two brigades, those for and those against contact. In her view those against were often resource, rather than child needs led, and those against sometimes ignored the issues for

the child, focusing on the parent's needs. In hoping to reach a balanced view, she tried to begin each assessment with an open mind.

Common themes.

The themes clearly shared by all three experts included the following, of which the first four were emphasised by all three experts :

1. Attachment.
2. Parental capacity/ability to support permanency.
3. Stability/permanency.
4. Safety.
5. Contact as central to identity.
6. Age of the child.
7. Power and responsibility.

Of these, items 2, 4, 5 and 6 were common to all three groups and considered to be super ordinate themes.

1. Attachment.

On this issue two experts appear to have fairly similar views, in that attachment, as ensuring or enhancing permanency/stability, was central.

When discussing the wishes of alternative parents, expert three struggles with the child's need to have contact with their birth parents, in terms of his/her identity, and concludes that attachment as enhancing stability/permanency should take precedence:

Expert 3 : "the need for permanence and attachment are paramountthen I think that there are situations where contact has to be sacrificed for the permanency and secure attachment of the child (7.2).

Expert two appears to focus on attachment as being particularly important in relation to the child's identity and maintaining important relationships:

"Probably the most important element of that assessment would be, what I view to be the quality of the attachment.....not of the parent to the child but the child to parent. We're talking about whether, in fact, this child has a kind of, mental representation of this adult as their mother. (9.5).

She goes on to expand:

"if their primary attachment, whatever it's quality, has been with one of their natural parents, then contact will be important". (9.17).

2. Parental capacity.

For expert one the capacity of a birth parent to put a child's needs before their own, whether attached to that child or not, was of paramount importance:

"In terms of the adults, if they are sitting in with me for an hour, if they can actually talk about the child and not talk about themselves and their own problems, that gives me a sense, that there is a possibility of, even if only momentarily, they can think about what's best for the child and many of them fail that. (9.13).

For expert two this was embedded in attachment, although like expert one also linked implicitly to parental sensitivity to the child's needs:

"I observe parenting and what you're doing at the same time is observing what you might call the emotional sensitivity of the parent (2.19).

For expert three the importance of the birth parents to support the alternative placement and permanency, which implies an ability to relinquish their own needs, but not stated explicitly, is central. She emphasises the importance of permanency/stability:

"If the intention is for this placement to be permanent, the parent must find a way of not conveying to the child that they are going to get the child back.....contact can't.....mustn't undermine the child's permanency".(6.6).

3. Stability/permanency.

This was a theme that was both stated separately, as well as being linked to attachment and parental capacity and their importance in relation to stability and permanency.

For expert two, safety appeared to be of paramount importance (see 4. *Safety* below), second to that was the importance of stability and continuity in children's lives:

Expert 2 : "what these children need most of all is stability, and a special kind of stability. (31.18). In developing this theme she drew on personal experiences as a parent.

For expert three permanency and a secure attachment were crucial, and anything which might undermine that e.g. the parents not supporting a placement, were contra indications for contact:

"the need for permanence and attachment are paramount.....then I think there are situations where contact has to be sacrificed for the permanency and secure attachment of the child"(7.2).

4. Safety

This was particularly important to this group, who are all, as well as being experts, clinicians. It may well be that from the position of working with children and young people who have been neglected or abused, this was a particularly influential and important principle. It is also generally the case that experts are only instructed in the

more complex, contentious cases, where unresolved issues relating to abuse may well be a more common feature.

Expert one when weighing up whether a mother with a mental illness should have contact with her child concluded:

"When she was too disturbed then clearly it would be damaging for the child", and,
 "if the child is going to feel incredibly responsible or incredibly terrified.....I may not go with contact"(11.18).

Expert two is unequivocal, and for her safety would, I believe, be her highest ordering principle:

"the two issues are, are they going to be safe.....and to benefit, actively benefit, from the contact"(17.19).

As is expert three:

"first of all contact has to be safe for the child and, you know, starts with the physical safety, and goes on, you know, sexual safety and so on, but also emotional safety (4.20).

5. Contact as central to identity.

Although this featured in the accounts of all the experts, it was not given particular emphasis by any of them, in comparison to the guardian's (see next section), for whom it seemed to be of paramount importance.

Two of the experts put greater emphasis on this theme than the other, often drawing on their past experience of children who return to their parents, or on findings from studies of adult adoptees.

Expert 1 : "I have shifted into recognising that when push comes to shove the birth family maybe what the young person has when they are 18 or 21"(7.13), and,

"So I think it (contact) is really important in terms of the child's identity" (32.18).

Expert 3 : "I'm thinking of adults who've been adopted. I suspect that if they'd seen their parents from time to time, would probably have felt the more complete, than not having done so"(21.3).

6. Age of the child

Although mentioned by each of the experts, this did not feature highly as a guiding principle, except perhaps in being subsumed under another theme such as attachment. In the case of expert three she struggled with making decisions about younger children, which she explained in terms of the difficulties in ascertaining their wishes:

"I don't know why it should be more difficult with little ones than the older ones, I think that the older ones can tell you"(31.15).

7. Responsibility and power

For expert one there was a strong theme of realism and being flexible. This was linked to her sense of responsibility for her influence as an expert working within a context of financial constraints :

"I have had to take more responsibility for looking at the resources" (17.20), and,

"not being quite so rigid in terms of what I think.....the optimum that's possible realistically" (18.13).

When describing a case she was involved in, her recommendations effectively used up a local budget, the results of which:

"means we haven't got anything left to spend on specialist provision for any one else, and you think, "Hang on, what have I done?"(19.14).

For expert two her autonomy was essential. She saw herself as separate and not accountable to an organisation, or influenced by the views of others:

"I leave other people to struggle, with the stuff, they are after all paid for it" (20.19).

Expert three struggles with the responsibility of making decisions about younger children, partly it would seem because it is difficult to gain their views and also because of the responsibility:

"I don't know why it should be more difficult with the little ones than the older ones, I think that the older ones can tell you. I think it's the responsibility" (31.15).

Themes shared by two of the three were:

1. Children's rights/views/wishes.
2. Having an open mind.
3. Views of the alternative carers.

1. Children's wishes.

These were central to two of the experts thinking. For expert one this featured highly and was encapsulated in the dilemma of ascertaining the views of children, yet balancing this with adult responsibility:

"Children's rights, I think that's exercised me a lot, how we take seriously what they say and yet retain the adult responsibility for key decision making" (23.4).

For expert three the child's wish for and agreement to contact was central. She would always want to:

"explore why the child doesn't want it (contact)" (5.10), but, in the final analysis if the child is against contact:

"I think to overrule a child, is another reason against contact, or rather the child has to wish it for contact to take place" (5.15).

The themes of having an open mind and the views of the alternative carers were mentioned by two of the experts, but without much emphasis.

Idiosyncratic theme.

1. Contact as having a symbolic function.

In this group this was a major theme for only one individual, to whom it was central. To her changes in contact demonstrated in a tangible way, the reality of living apart permanently from birth parents. She also saw maintaining contact as being used on occasions to avoid the real pain of separation and loss in permanent alternative care:

"I think this issue of loss is very difficult 'cos I think we fudge the issue by wanting to sweeten the pill of loss, by having contact" (16.7), and:

"Contact has to reduce in frequency.....to such an extent that it becomes tangible for the child" (17.23).

The issue of the pain of loss, which is also touched on here, comes up for expert one when she discusses what she experiences as being most difficult in this area of work. In this extract she is talking about birth parents:

"I also know a great deal about them and the awfulness of what life has done to them and the child within them that, you know, probably didn't have a chance, and I think that's what I find most painful and difficult" (16.6).

This awareness of and empathy with the position of parents may well be a particular feature of this group, who as clinicians work with parents and children on a daily basis. Also embedded within the idea of contact as having a symbolic of function, is the emphasis yet again on the reality of permanence as enhancing the stability of a placement.

Influences on thinking

All three experts mentioned the strong influence of theoretical models, although each from a slightly different orientation. The most marked of these being experts one and two.

Expert 1 : "the work of Bion and Winnicott on primary maternal preoccupation, reverie, the containing function, internalising, so the significance of one's internal relations"(8.9).

Expert 2 : "I do a little mental health screen.....just for depression and anxiety and the general health questionnaire"(11.24), and,

"direct recording using the child/parent game categories of parenting"(12.7).

Experts one and two both mentioned the importance of learning through experience, "the apprenticeship model". This included the central importance of whom they learned from in their training and particular cases that had shifted their thinking.

Although also linked to the autonomy of experts, expert two clearly saw her assessments as less connected to available resources, than expert one. This may be

explained in part by expert one being connected closely with the struggles of local authorities in an active capacity, whilst expert two works out side of the NHS.

THE GUARDIAN AD LITEMS.

This group consisted of three guardian ad Litem, one of whom was also a panel manager and one of whom was a relatively new guardian i.e. appointed after the implementation of the Children Act, 1989 (DoH, 1991). For the guardians as a group, contact was seen as highly valued, particularly in enabling and facilitating a child's sense of identity. All three guardians valued the role of birth parents in supporting permanency, as well as the attitude of the alternative carers towards the birth parents, as making contact “work”. Guardian three felt that she was more in favour of contact than guardians appointed before the implementation of the Children Act. Each were sensitive to race, ethnicity, culture and gender in their choices of professionals and placements for children. Guardian one was particularly occupied by the conflicting roles of being both a guardian and panel manager. Guardian two grappled with issues of safety with contact and guardian three with assessing parents when at their most vulnerable.

They saw themselves as often being opposed to the views of the local authority (although not always social workers), who they regarded as frequently being constrained by fixed and rigid policies and practices, which were resource rather than child needs led. The feeling of being disempowered however, varied between them, with one guardian in particular, using the differences she perceived, especially in relation to experts, to her advantage.

Common themes.

The themes shared by all three guardians included :

1. Contact as central to identity.
2. Children's rights/wishes/views.
3. Safety.
4. Power and responsibility.

Of these items 1, 2 and 3 were considered super ordinate themes.

1. **Contact as central to identity**

The idea that contact with birth parents and relatives is important in developing a coherent sense of self, via maintaining ongoing relationships; providing information about origins and history and enabling the development of new relationships was central to all three guardians. Indeed on the basis of this principle one guardian could think of no circumstances under which she would not consider at least letterbox, i.e. in direct contact.

Guardian 2: "I won't ever say there shouldn't be post box contact.....**ever**.....I can think of no circumstances"(12.3).

Not only was contact seen by guardian two as central to developing a coherent sense of self, an absence of this in her view would impair the child's ability to make relationships:

"an older child's history will always lie with his birth family and you can't sever it.....and then if you destroy.....take that bit of the child's history away, your damaging its ability to make a link with its new family" (10.7).

This also seemed to be the case for both other guardians. Contact in some form needs to be available, in order to prepare children for what was seen as the inevitable wish to contact their birth family:

Guardian 1: "allowing for the door to be kept open as the child grows older, so that they grow up with an awareness and knowledge, if it's indirect contact for a while it may eventually change to direct, when the child's old enough to choose" (25.14).

Guardian one spoke movingly of her experiences as a mother and her anticipation of when she would be a grand mother, this reinforced her views about the importance of the extended family in establishing a child's sense of identity.

Guardian 3: "how important it is even in adoption, for children to be prepared, if there is no contact, to meet the family, because they're going to. I mean most children are going to"(19.20).

The idea that the meaning of contact is to give a sense of identity pervades these three interviews. It includes contact with grandparents and siblings and contact with adoption.

Guardian three, rather like judge two who saw denying contact as:

"Those statutes.....do treat adoption as being a closed situation, the only event in a child's life which would disassociate them from their birth parents in the same way is death"(5.21).

Went on to say : "how does the child maintain its identity? Lose everything they have come with! Pretending that the other family doesn't exist" (16.9).

In all of these views is the idea articulated by expert three that contact has a symbolic function, in communicating to all concerned the ideas/beliefs held by others.

2. Children's rights/wishes/views.

Being the representatives of the child, it is perhaps not surprising that the views of children features in all the interviews with the guardians. However, the importance and meaning given to this issue does appear to vary. For example guardian two only touches on this once and in relation to respecting a child's wishes, whilst also needing to protect her and the effect this has on the guardian's relationship with this child. She also mentions the importance of this girl's relationship with her mother and how influential this is.

The others two guardian's focus is more on ascertaining the child's view:

Guardian 1: "my two priorities really, getting a solicitor, and meeting the children.....I ask them to tell me their story" (15.15) and,

"I've got straight from them what it was like. That was my priority" (17.4).

Guardian three would see the child's view as very influential. When discussing possible contra indications for contact:

" if the child said very clearly they didn't want to see the parents" (8.9).

This is a similar view to that expressed by expert three.

3. Safety.

Although mentioned by all three guardians, this was generally in response to questions relating to contra indications or exceptions to the strongly held principle of contact :

Guardian 1 : "there are exceptional circumstances, I think the violence and sexual abuse and sometimes emotional abuse" (34.17).

For guardian two this is clearly linked the importance of reliability:

"but even say a parent had a kind of mental illness that rendered them incapable of caring but not loving, and if they could be a modicum of reliability, 'cos reliability is significant, I would still consider contact" (13.13)

One guardian clearly struggled with contact, when there was an issue of safety as well. When discussing possible contraindications for contact she says:

"Where there is a grave mental incapacity, substance abuse.....anything which is potentially detrimental to the child, no, history of violence, but where there is no reason to suppose that it's going to be a barrier to the placement the answer must always be yes"(41.22).

4. Power and responsibility.

All three guardians spoke of the importance of their role being independent of statutory responsibilities. This was also mentioned by expert two who emphasised her autonomy and independence. One however, was very preoccupied with the issues of monitoring (as a panel manager, employed by the local authority), independent practitioners:

"It's a difficult role managing independent practitioners" (2.5).

This guardian also touched on the disempowered position of birth parents:

"and its not comfortable, very hard to manage, any body would find it really hard, so I think they ask an impossible job of parents to manage contact, because, you know, they've taken that child off" (28.1).

Similarly guardian 3 : "it's impossible to ask parents to consider the future when they're going to put everything into getting their children back, so then I think they're in a very difficult position to be able to be assessed on that basis" (7.25).

This guardian rather than feel disempowered by experts, used her position to harness their expertise to her clients advantage :

"I tried to make sure they had an expert that colluded with their position and I even tried to bring in other experts in that.....who have been a very good at making sure these issues (of race) are back on the table" (14.4).

Themes that were shared by any two of the guardians included :

1. Parental capacity/ability to support permanency.
2. Age of the child.
3. Ethnicity/race/gender/culture.

The first 2 of these items were super ordinate themes. The theme of the views of alternative carers appear to be linked in this group to parental capacity.

1. Parental capacity.

For the guardians the aspect of this theme that was important was, the ability of the birth parents to support permanency. This featured more highly in the interviews with guardians one and three. Guardian three's views where not dissimilar to those held by expert three, that contact with birth parents must demonstrate support for permanency. Guardian three touches upon how central the relationship between both sets of parents is :

"It's also about the mother, the parents, and how they accept the situation. There are times when some parents get on very well with the foster parents, and that's a good indication of how they're going to move the situation on" (7.14).

Similarly guardian one focuses on this interaction:

"I think an awful lot depends on a placement,.....contact should be enjoyable and if its not positive its going to be quite destructive, so you need to know the placement, and how the carers of the child feel about contact, because they can give the child a feeling of split loyalty". (27.5)

This awareness of the importance of the relationship between both sets of carers raises the dilemma addressed later on about how to make meaningful decisions and recommendations at a fixed point in time, when the new parents have yet to be decided upon.

2. **Age of the child** was emphasised by all three guardians, although not often explained. Generally this seemed to be linked either to attachment or, in the case of older children to identity.

3. **Ethnicity/race/gender/culture.**

The other principle that appeared to be particularly important to the guardians was the issue of being sensitive to ethnicity, race and gender. This was demonstrated by choosing appropriate professionals to work with as well as taking these issues into account when making recommendations for a particular child. For guardian three this was also linked to how she employed her influence and power to ensure these issues were addressed, for example by choosing professionals who would represent a child appropriately :

"its a black family who are really angry with the way of the local authority dealt with this particular case, because the child has been so inappropriately placed.....I was so concerned.....I asked for it to be dealt with in the High Court" (12.8), and,

"I've tried to bring in other experts in that.....who have been very good at making sure those issues (racial)are back on the table" (14.4).

Guardian two similarly used this principle of matching professional to the situation:

"I do try to appoint racially appropriate solicitors where its necessary" (4.6),and,

"If there was a relative who represented that culture, I would encourage strong contact" (27.4).

Guardian1: "The first thing I do is appoint a solicitor and in doing that I would look at the age of the child, ethnic origin, gender and try and match a children panel solicitor that I know"(13.3).

Idiosyncratic theme.

1. Having different, potentially conflicting views to others.

One theme emerged from this group alone. This was one in which they felt that their views were often both different to, and often in conflict with those of other professional groups. Most commonly this was in relation to the local authority, who they often saw as being policy or resource driven. Sometimes the guardians saw the local authorities as favouring parents, especially alternative carers, at the expense of the child's needs. I am reminded of expert three, who said that there were often two opposing "brigades", the pro- and anti-contact brigades. In her view :

"I think the anti-brigade is very much resource led rather than child's needs led..... people who are pro-contact I think sometimes ignore issues for the child, and are often based on the parents rather than the child's needs".

Although different in emphasis this resonates with the somewhat embattled position described by the guardians. Each of the guardians said that they were strongly influenced by research that has been conducted by what may be described as a particularly pro-contact school of thought. This is discussed in more detail below, when outlining some of the influences mentioned by this group.

In terms of policies and procedures:

Guardian 1 : "The local authority would be more inclined to say no contact.....what we're coming across is sometimes a kind of formulaic approach to contact from the courts and local authority" (23.20).

Guardian 2: "I think family placement workers have a very precious attitude towards their adopters and I find it's not always the child's interests they are serving" (13. 2).

Guardian 3 : "because its so new (contact in adoption) local authorities are not keen to look at the future of adoption in terms of resource implications" (22.2).

Experts are also seen as potentially undermining of the guardians :

Guardian 1 : " I know a lot of guardians feel strongly that social work is being undermined by the use of experts. That actually social workers and guardians have got the expertise" (18.11).

For guardian two this also included the parents, the local authority, experts and judges :

"the parents that we're seeing, there's greater instability.....and so therefore their hostility to authority is much greater and so then you don't always ask about families" (4.7), and,

"you have a parent who in some cases they're just intractable, and there's nothing you can do, and they have to have their say, and it's a waste of public money, but it's civil liberties and you have to go along with it" (19.10).

This seemed to contrast with her strongly asserted views about the importance of the birth family.

I wonder to what degree this view of others is linked to a sense of not feeling valued:

"it's one of the ways the service functions, 'cos they rely on the goodwill of peoplewith second incomes....it's not easy I would have thought to bring up a family doing this kind of work" (2.14).

Influences on thinking

All three guardians were strongly influenced by the work of June Thoburn (Thoburn,1990) and Joan Fratter (Fratter, 1996).

Two of the three guardians spoke movingly, of the influence of being a parent, anticipating becoming grand parents, and their own life experiences, in developing their ideas in relation to contact.

THE JUDGES

The judges interviewed worked in a range of courts, including a Magistrates Court, A District and County Court and a High Court. Although all starting from the position of applying the law, the judges differed in their personal views and influences. Each were guided by the welfare checklist and the principle of contact with natural parents, although judges one and three differed in their confidence in this. All were influenced by the Court of Appeal, with judges two and three placing more emphasis than judge one on the views of others, e.g. guardians and the child.

Judge one was concerned about being isolated from feedback. He took into account, parental capacity to reflect on the child's needs and was empathetic to the position of fathers. He saw adoption as different to other forms of permanency and "closed", unlike judge two. In her view closed adoption was outdated, denying origins and needing to include both permanency and contact. She appeared to struggle with a law that conflicted with her own views.

Judge three described an immense sense of responsibility, which was eased by sharing decisions and the advice of experts. She appeared to struggle with an apparent contradiction in the law, on occasion, when she saw an adult relationship having an detrimental effect on children. As a group only one theme was common to all three judges (see below). Other themes, common to the majority of participants and considered super ordinate, such as Safety, Age and Wishes of the child and Contact as central to identity often occurred in one or two members of this group.

Common theme.

1. The law as paramount in decision making.

This was clearly the major guiding principle for all the judges, as their role is to apply the law. This is demonstrated in attention to the welfare checklist (Children Act, 1989), and the principle that contact with a natural parent is in the best interests of a child. It was also the only theme shared by all three judges. However, interestingly, this was not the main preoccupation of two of the judges, one of whom clearly struggled in cases where she was not clear whether contact with a birth parent was in a child's best interests.

Each of the judges was conscious of the Court of Appeal and case law in guiding their decisions, one in particular was very conscious of putting her own views to one side:

"My personal view is very much in favour of contact, however, I am aware of my limitations, sitting as a judge"(8.21).

Another, saw enforcement of the law, as important and described a rare case of imposing a prison sentence on a mother, who continually refused to obey a contact order:

"That's not something I would ever like to do, but I did do it once, and I did it because the Court of Appeal said, in the end, if you make orders which you are making for the benefit of children, you must try to enforce them" (26.20).

However, whilst working within their understanding of the law, there were marked differences in what influenced these judges in their decision making.

A central theme for judge one was the degree to which he felt that the birth parents had thought through the issues of contact. He used this as a measure of their motivation and ability to consider the child's needs. Not a dissimilar idea to that of *parental capacity*:

"she came out of it the worst really, because he came across as reflective, and looking not just at his own interests but the interests of the child" (17.10) and,

"You do query their motivation if they haven't worked out the details" (11.19).

Other shared themes :

1. **Safety**

This was also a factor, which was something of a preoccupation for judge three. It was she who clearly struggled with ordering contact when she felt it might be psychologically unhelpful :

"I am sometimes worried that the contact with that violent parent might be absolutely wrong and we're taking responsibility for the child seeing that violent parent" (5.5).

2. **Adoption as closed.**

Judge one clearly saw adoption as different to other forms of permanency, and one where there should be no contact. This was not the view of judge two, although she was aware that the law differed to her in this respect.

3. **Age and wishes of the child.**

Both judges one and two saw the age of the child as important, but apparently for different reasons. For judge one this was linked to the wishes of the children, to which he did not give particular weight, unlike judge two.

Judge1: "Really, indeed one has to say quite firmly that the suggested views of the child, say, five or six can't be given a great deal of weight" (8.15). He does however feel that the views of older children are important:

"if you've got a teenage child.....who's been implacably opposed to contact, then it's very difficult to order it"(8.8).

In contrast judge 2 : "the wishes and feelings of the child are first" (12.12), and,

"You would expect to be able to glean the wishes and feelings of the child through the guardian" (12.14).

4. Contact as central to identity.

Judges two and three both saw roots, origins and identity as important, particularly judge two:

"a situation where the child becomes part of that family and has to forget about its previous origins.....that concerns me really" (11.4).

For this judge the importance of origins to children was central and she was very critical of the closed nature of adoptions :

"those statutes.....do treat adoption as being a closed situation, the only other event which would disassociate them from their birth parents in the same way is death" (5.21).

For this judge the law was outdated and needed to change. When asked in what ways she said :

" I think an order for permanency, which can't be challenged by the parents, to prevent repeated applications to the court, throughout the child's life" (11.14), and,

"an order for permanency which does not pretend that the child's parents are dead or extinguish parental responsibility, in the way adoption does"(11.16).

Here the need for permanency and links with origins are brought together.

5. Stability and permanency

Although judge two was clear that she was bound to apply the law and was constrained by this, she placed most emphasis on stability and permanency, when considering the issue of contact:

"contact has to dovetail with the security of the placement as being the priority for the child"(4.13).

In order for contact not to be destabilising in any way :

"contact not to be an unsettling influence on the placement, professionals will be looking to parents accepting the principle of permanence and, to be able to cope with structured arrangements for contact" (4.22).

6. Open mind

For judge three beginning with an open mind and not pre-judging an issue was central. She expressed extreme concern about the possibility of bias towards parents at the expense of the needs of the child. This was also linked to the high levels of concern and responsibility she felt about failing the child or making mistakes:

"it does worry us that they (guardians, social workers and probation officers), maybe swayed by the one parent they've had most contact with" (6.22).

7. Power and responsibility.

Both judges one and three discussed at length their feelings of responsibility. For judge one this was in terms of not knowing much about the outcome of his judgements. He was strongly of the view that judges would benefit from more shared work and feedback in order to evaluate their performance:

"one actually doesn't get any feedback.....I make a decision, I may be taking a risk.....there's a risk element in all these decisions" (12.6), and,

"one of the judges difficulties is you never see another court in action" (15.8), and,

"I don't get feedback in those cases where I don't order contact,.....it an enormous weakness in the system" (12.22).

Judge three had a rather different preoccupation, the responsibility of getting it right for the child and a fear of failing him or her :

"It is a vexed sense of responsibility.....they look forward or are frightened of the meeting and both ways you've failed, if it doesn't take place or if it takes place acrimoniously or doesn't work out" (14.21).

For judge three there was an apparent contradiction in the child's needs being paramount when in her view this could conflict with the child seeing a natural parent. This was particularly apparent in relation to violence between parents :

"the law is veering towards always saying, or nearly always saying, that a parent is better than no parent, or the second parent is better than no second parent, but when there's been violence.....I am sometimes very worried that the contact with the violent parent might be absolutely wrong" (5.5).

For judge two she was acutely aware of the powerlessness of the birth parents:

"once an adoption order is made, the birth parents don't have an automatic right to apply for contact" (7.24), and,

"it does place the birth parents in a disadvantaged position" (8.2).

Influences on thinking

These included the Court of Appeal, more senior judges, the views of guardians and particularly experts and the resources available. The theme of realism so characteristic of much of what expert one said, re-emerged:

Judge 1 : "One is interested in practical arrangements" (10.18).

The views of experts as being influential appeared to be important for judges one and two in terms of providing information. For judge three the emphasis was on reassurance and guidance.

Judge one appeared to be empathetic to the position of fathers, and said of himself :

"I know it was said then that I favoured the men rather than the women.....but at least I am conscious of it" (32.18).

SECTION FOUR - SUMMARY OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AND WITHIN GROUPS.

Common themes.

Of the super ordinate themes *Contact as central to identity*; *Safety of the child*; *Children's rights and wishes* and *The age of the child*, featured significantly in all three groups. However the emphasis placed on these varied both within and between groups, with the guardians and one of the judges, placing particular emphasis on *Contact as central to identity*, with the guardians using pro-contact research and personal experiences to support their positions. For the group of experts *Safety* was particularly important, as were *Stability/permanency of placement* and the *Capacity of the birth parents* to meet the needs of the child and to support permanency. They spoke of beginning with an "open mind", and using their experiences as professionals and theoretical frameworks to justify their positions. *Children's rights and wishes* were emphasised by all the experts and one of the judges. Although mentioned by the guardians this principle was not given particular weight, although each spoke of being the child's advocate. For one judge, the wishes of children below the age of 10 or 11 years, would hold little weight. Although the *Age of the child* was mentioned by all three groups, the meaning behind this generally appeared to be different, within and between groups. Within the guardian group this was linked to attachment in two instances, but in apparently different ways. For one, a young child had a better chance of making a new attachment if already attached to a parent, and should have little contact, whilst for another a young child must have a lot of contact, because of this attachment. For this group and the experts, age, particularly older children was linked to identity. For the judges age appeared to be linked to the views of the child, although

for one judge this was in terms of the weight given to these, for another it was in terms of how to ascertain these. *Parental capacity*, in terms of the capacity of the birth parents to meet the needs of the child and support permanency, featured highly for the experts and two of the guardians. This is an area that experts are commonly instructed to assess. It was touched on only briefly by one of the judges.

Of the other shared but not super ordinate themes, *Permanency and stability of placement* were very important to the experts and was mentioned by one of the judges. For the experts this was also linked to attachment and parental capacity, as being seen as important factors in ensuring stability of placement. For the guardians contact was highly valued, particularly in facilitating a child's sense of identity. They were the only group that emphasised *race, ethnicity, culture and gender*, in decision making, which for them was linked to identity, although this was mentioned by one expert. *The law as paramount* in decision making was the only theme shared by all three judges, and was idiosyncratic to this group. For one this raised anxieties about meeting the needs of children, and the possibility of making mistakes. For another the law contradicted her beliefs about contact with adoption, which she felt should be open. Only two participants felt that adoption should be closed, one expert and one judge, which may be linked to personal experiences. *Power and responsibility* was mentioned by all three groups, but in quite different ways. One expert described a strong sense of responsibility and a need to be flexible and realistic, influenced by her experiences in this area of work. Another emphasised her separateness from others in proceedings and her autonomy, which she saw as part of being "independent". All three experts were sensitive to the disempowered position of birth parents, as were one of the guardians and one of the judges. Although each of the

guardians presented an “embattled” position, one of the guardians exploited differences she perceived to her advantage, which may, partly be linked to her appointment after the implementation of the Children Act. Judges two and three discussed their feelings of responsibility in quite different ways. For one it was in terms of ensuring the law was carried out, and evaluated, for which he felt the greatest responsibility. For the other it was in terms of her fears of failing children, in carrying out the law, whom she felt were her greatest responsibility. Previous experiences, one in being overturned by the Court of appeal, the other in feeling she had failed a child seemed to have been very influential.

Idiosyncratic themes.

Of the more idiosyncratic themes contact having a symbolic function was central to one of the experts who saw contact as having a positive function, in communicating the reality of permanency, dispelling myths and reassuring children about their parents. She also felt that it was used to avoid or deny the pain and loss of separation. Although mentioned less explicitly this idea was alluded to by others, e.g. judge two’s view that closed adoption represents the end of a relationship for a child with a parent in a similar way to the death of that parent.

Having different, potentially conflicting views to others, was a theme particular to the guardians, and featured highly for them all. This difference seemed to be most marked in relation to social services and local authorities, who they perceived as being policy and resource driven. They felt that local authorities often favoured alternative parents. Expert three described two opposing “brigades”, one pro- and one anti-contact. Her explanation that the pro group favoured birth parents at the expense of children’s needs was different to the guardians. They saw contact as favouring children. The guardians and this expert

agreed that those against contact were often guarding resources. In general the guardians seemed to feel in a somewhat embattled position, and one felt that her views were often in opposition to guardians appointed before the implementation of the Children Act, 1989, who she felt to be less pro-contact than she was.

Influences

All three experts mentioned a strong influence of explicit theoretical models, although each from a slightly different orientation. Other influences, common to all groups were their experiences as professionals, although these were varied. Expert one felt that these had resulted in her taking a more realistic, balanced, view, where as judge three felt that her experiences had made her more cautious. For the guardians, they were united in the importance they placed on the work of particular writers who tended to be pro-contact in relation to identity.

In terms of personal experiences, there was only one man in the sample who was also the only one who paid particular attention to the role and position of fathers. There was also only one black person, who emphasised racial issues in decision making. Many of the participants were parents and linked these experiences to their understanding of the needs of children. The adoptive parents were not in favour of contact in adoption.

SECTION FIVE - THE INTERVIEWER.

In reflecting on the interviews and my role within them, I have looked at the notes I made in my journal.

Firstly I am very aware of being another expert who works in an institution that is seen by some as being "expert". Although each participant was asked what effect this might have, few felt that it had. One to whom I had been speaking previously, on a separate issue said that she might have answered some of the questions differently, if she had not checked out my other views first. I was also conscious when analysing the transcripts, of not always following up some points made by the experts, perhaps because I felt I had a shared understanding of what they said.

Two of the guardians spoke of feeling disempowered by experts, the third, of using her authority to harness the influence she saw experts as having. However, the somewhat isolated nature of their role, that the guardians may experience, and sense of being embattled may well have resulted in them being less open, or of saying what they thought I expected or hoped to hear. Certainly I noticed on two occasions, particularly in relation to the importance of birth parents supporting permanency, agreeing with respondents rather vigorously.

The judges were clear and precise, but surprisingly varied in their views. The magistrate appeared to value expert opinion very highly which may well have been emphasised by her perception of my role.

DISCUSSION

OVERVIEW

All of the respondents, in making recommendations or decisions about contact between children in permanent, alternative care, and their birth parents, focused on "the best interests of the child". In doing that, each felt that their assessments were child focused. However, as these ideas were explored in detail, a number of beliefs emerged that organised individuals in the assessment and decision making process. Of these five main themes were discovered, that seemed to be particularly salient, and were conceptualised as, parental capacity; children's rights and wishes; contact as central to identity; the safety and the age of the child. There were seven other common themes which were described as permanency and stability; having an open mind; adoption as closed; attachment; ethnicity/race/gender/culture; views of alternative carers and power and responsibility. Three themes occurred in only one group or individual and were, having conflicting views to others; contact as having a symbolic function and the law as paramount. Many of these themes occurred in all the interviews, although with different degrees of emphasis, others occurred only in one or two professional groups. These similarities and differences are understood in terms of the different ways in which individuals position themselves in relation to the question of contact, based on professional positions and responsibilities and influenced by a range of professional and personal influences. Consideration is given to how the themes are played out in terms of the discourses professionals used to present their position and argue different cases, and some of the contradictions, to emerge. In essence the guardian ad Litem, as child advocates put a great deal of weight on the importance of contact, as central to identity

and were strongly influenced by research supporting this view. Despite their influential position, they often felt disempowered, in legal proceedings. The experts took a more "detached", evidence based position, and were particularly concerned about safety and emotional needs of children. The judges worked within a legal framework, within which individual differences emerged. The issue of power and responsibility given to certain discourses is discussed.

DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY

One of the strengths of the research was the openness with which participants responded to the request to be interviewed, and the interview itself. This is an area in which all those approached welcomed further investigation. Many commented on the "closed" nature of proceedings, i.e. in which there was little feedback about the consequences of their actions, or comparisons made with views of others, in similar positions. This research offered feedback both about the processes they are involved in and the findings of this study. They were very open about both their professional/theoretical views and personal ones, which were often interwoven in complex ways, reflecting the nature of the assessments they were involved in making. The inclusion of as much of their words as possible, is an attempt to capture this.

Gaining a sample was not a problem, although given that there were three different professional groups, a sample of nine may be considered to be a rather small. There was only one man in the sample, and although this was not a group design, ideally the sample would have been more representative in terms of gender. The complexity of the data gathered from each respondent has meant a selectivity and concern about missing

information. However, the responses to the summary letters suggest that the participants felt well and fairly represented in their views.

An important aspect to consider is respondent bias. My influence on the interviewee's answers is an issue, about which I became increasingly aware, in analysing the transcripts and reading my journal. From a systemic perspective there is a recognition that meanings come out of interaction and I was an active participant in the interview process. Although working from as neutral a position as possible, I clearly had an influence on the process, both in terms of my responses and the beliefs held about my role, the institution I work in and reasons for conducting research of this nature. IPA is particularly relevant here, as research is seen as a co-construction between participant and researcher, in that it emerges from the researcher's engagement with the participant and the data. Although there were themes that occurred across all groups, and some that occurred particularly within groups, individual meanings were not lost. In some ways, this design is similar to a multiple single case study, in which the individual nature of each case is considered first, followed by comparisons across cases, and similarities and differences may be explored (Hilliard, 1993).

The issue of reflexivity.

As mentioned above, as the interviewer I was inevitably a participant in the meanings generated, in this process. Not only was I engaged in the process, the interviewee's perceptions of my role, expectations and reasons for conducting the research would influence how they chose to present themselves to me, and the discourses they employed. Keeping a research diary was helpful in tracking some of my assumptions and theoretical biases. In analysing the guardians' interviews I was conscious of being a

member of a group they felt undermined by. This may have effected what they said in relation to the role of experts. Similarly my reading of the expert's transcripts led me initially to the conclusion that they were more theoretically grounded than the other participants. However, this assumption that the experts' understanding of theoretical models was more accurate than that of others, may be understood as a psychological discourse, in which we have colonised certain meanings e.g. attachment. This assumption may have the effect on disempowering others in relation to these ideas. Certainly, one of the judges expressed a concern about "not knowing", and needing to be told by experts, about the psychological needs of children. Having an interview format, a set of probes and working from a position of curiosity, were all helpful in maintaining my role of researcher and not engaging in a conversation in which I was the expert.

Ethical issues.

With a small sample, taken from a fairly small and well known group of potential interviewees, issues of confidentiality have been critical. Much of what was said made participants identifiable. Therefore at the expense of some of the data, particularly personal influences, some of the findings are presented with specific, identifiable details removed or disguised.

In relation to the impact of the interview on the participants, each received a detailed summary of their interviews, which they were invited to comment on , prior to inclusion in this report. All were pleased with the summary they received, feeling that it was an accurate and fair summary of their views. A number re-emphasised particular points and these were included in the final data analysis.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS.

From the interviews 5 overarching, 7 common and 3 idiosyncratic themes emerged, within which there were sub themes. Not all of these themes were present in all interviews and some clustered in terms of the importance given, within professional groups. For individuals, within each of these clusters, there were differences in the emphasis placed on certain principles, some appearing to be of a higher order, in terms of organising their thinking about contact, than others. Pearce and Cronen, (Pearce and Cronen, 1980) offer a helpful model for conceptualising this, “The co-ordinated management of meaning”, which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (Multiple levels of meaning).

Experts.

The experts as a group presented themselves as working from a position of being open-minded, detached and evidence based. This group expressed their theoretical positions, although varied, with confidence. Attachment Theory offered a guiding theoretical framework common to them all. The quality of attachment as an important precursor for future relationships was crucial. For one of the experts this was the key to stability, whilst for another, the capacity of birth parents, whether attached to a child or not, to support permanency, was the key. This in accordance with recent research findings that significantly poorer outcomes were found in children placed away from their parents, who had been rejected at birth by their birth parents, (Quinton et al 1998). Children who had not formed strong attachments and did not return affection to others were experienced by new parents as unrewarding and stressful to them.

The capacity for birth parents to relinquish their role as parents, whilst maintaining a positive influence in terms of supporting alternative carers, and not being seen to reject the child has been highlighted by Caroline Lindsey (Lindsey, 1995a). However the difficulties in assessing parental capacity at the stage of care proceedings, is difficult. Indeed it might be argued to be impossible for parents to relinquish their parental role and remain mature and rational, at this time, particularly as many may have been parented poorly themselves. It could also be argued that at the stage of care proceedings it is in the interests of the children to experience their parents as not rejecting of, but fighting for them. Perhaps the importance put on this discourse reflects, in part, an attempt to accommodate the painful and contradictory pressures of protecting children both from neglect but also from rejection. The experts, two of the guardians and one of the judges touched on the vulnerability of birth parents in this process. Their voices appear to be the least powerful, as reflected in their often having the poorest legal representation. Certainly parental rights and advocacy was noticeable in its absence. This may in part be linked to the perception of these parents as having failed or "damaged" their children in some way. One of the guardians referred to the children she saw as being damaged, rather than having had damaging experiences. Others spoke of the difficulties of alternative carers in supporting birth parents who had injured a child. These ideas carry negative, rejecting views of birth parents. This did not appear to be the case for the experts, perhaps because they often work with parents as clients, before, during and after proceedings.

Safety also appeared to be more important to this group, than the other two. It may be that as clinicians working with children and young people who have been abused, this is particularly influential. For one of the experts this could be thought of as the highest

ordering principle, whereas for the other two safety was embedded in ensuring stability and permanency. Contact as important to identity was mentioned by the experts but did not feature as highly as for the guardians. This was a little surprising, as identity as a psychological concept might have been more salient for the experts. However, the way in which this concept is discussed by the guardians is in “humanistic” rather than theoretical terms. The rights and wishes of children appeared to be more important to the expert group than any other. For the experts attachment and other theories, as being based on scientific “fact”, was employed to support these beliefs. Within this area of work, “expertness”, based on “fact” may be understood as a particularly powerful discourse. Underlying these beliefs were a number of assumptions about the nature of relationships based on developmental, “biological” and psycho-dynamic models. For the guardians the strongly held belief about the importance of contact appeared to be based on assumptions that reflected liberal “humanistic” assumptions about relationships. The use of outcome research to support these views, may in part be an attempt by a group that often felt undermined by “experts”, to employ a discourse that has particular power in this context. Indeed they were very concerned that the validity of some of this research had been questioned recently. Each of the guardians described personal experiences that both shaped and supported their views about relationships between parents and children. For both groups these particularly salient beliefs can be seen as reflecting cultural, agency, professional and personal norms.

The symbolic function of contact as communicating underlying messages or beliefs about relationships is an interesting theme. The guardians employed research that supported the idea of contact being important to maintain a sense of self and used those

studies in arguing their views. For one of the experts, she emphasised how contact can be used to demonstrate tangible changes in relationships and to deny painful realities, perhaps too difficult for professionals to face or own.

For this group as described above, theoretical models appeared to play an important part in their arguments. There was also an awareness of the socio-cultural norms in which "experts" have power invested in them. The responsibilities that accompanies this was important for two of the experts who were concerned about how realistic or representative their recommendations were. The ability to shape, e.g. as with the judges, and possibly to silence, e.g. as feared by the guardians, the discourses of others is the concern raised by Apter (Apter, 1996), about expert positions.

The guardians.

For this group the idea that contact with the birth parents is important in developing a coherent sense of self was central. Their arguments were supported by specific research studies indicating that a child's sense of identity seems linked to their understanding of their origins and to a sense of continuity with the past. Each of them mentioned feeling unsettled by a recent paper in which the methodological bases of these findings had been reviewed (Quinton et al. 1997). They described feeling confused by the contradictions in the research and hoped for guidance from new research. The strongly held belief in the importance of contact, was at times in conflict with issues of safety within this group. One member in particular appeared to struggle with this contradiction without apparently finding a resolution. Also some of the views held about birth parents, appeared to contradict with the value placed on their central role in maintaining a child's sense of identity.

As representatives of the child, it was not surprising that the views of the children featured in all the interviews with the guardians. Perhaps more surprising was the lack of emphasis placed on these. Each mentioned the views of children as important, yet spent little or no time in explaining how these would affect their practice. This was in contrast to the weight given to the views of parents in their assessments. This may be related to the powerlessness of children, who, without adult assistance have little access to proceedings.

Parental capacity in terms of both sets of parents supporting one another, was important to the guardians. They stressed the importance for the new parent to feel a sense of entitlement, and the role of the birth parents in facilitating this. The age of the child at placement was also addressed by the guardians, particularly in relation to older children maintaining contact with their “roots”.

The guardians were the only group to prioritise being sensitive to race, gender and culture in matching a child to professionals and placements. However, no consistent differences in terms of outcomes, based on gender, ethnicity and race matching have been demonstrated in the literature. It may be that for this group this is linked to the strong belief in contact as central to identity.

A strongly held view, particular to this group, was that their views were often different to and in conflict with those of others. Most commonly this was in relation to the local authority, who they saw as often being policy or resource driven, against contact and in favour of alternative carers. They explained their position of being in favour of contact as focusing on the child's needs. This was a different explanation to that given by one of the experts. She was critical of the pro- and anti-contact brigades. The former as

ignoring issues for the child, favouring birth parents, the latter being resource driven. On this second point she is in agreement with the guardians.

It was perhaps not surprising to find the guardians feeling in a different position to that of social workers and the local authority. The latter are working within a framework of child protection and statutory responsibilities. They have the responsibility of implementing the legislative framework for contact, whilst ensuring the safety of children. Guardian's see themselves as representing the child's voice, in which they see their sense of identity as central.

Two of the guardians felt undermined and disempowered by the use of experts, the third used her position and influence to harness the authority given to experts, to meet what she felt was the needs of those she represented. It is perhaps not surprising that those entrusted with representing the most vulnerable people in this process, the children, should feel the most vulnerable and embattled themselves. The guardians' uncertainty about their position is somewhat surprising, given the importance placed on their views by the judges. It may be that within this arena the voice of "expertness" prevails over that of experience and advocate, particularly given possible social/cultural norms about the group being represented e.g. as "damaged" and potentially "damaging/failing".

The judges.

For the judges, the law was paramount in their decision-making about contact, as outlined in the Children Act, 1989. In this act, the word access was replaced by "contact", and parental rights by parental "responsibility". These shifts underline changes in attitude to contact as a mutual relationship between parents and children and an acknowledged need for continuity in their relationship with their parents (Lindsey, 1995). The notion

that contact with a natural parent is in the child's best interests was a given for two, but not the third judge. She grappled with what she saw as a contradiction between this principle and that of the child's needs, when seeing a parent might not meet these. In this she was influenced by what she saw as a previously mistaken decision, in applying the law. The differences in views within this group were quite marked. This may be a function of different experiences, but also the courts in which they sit. However, all believed themselves to be applying the principles of the Children Act. In doing this one understood hearing the voice of the child as having particular importance, whilst another gave equal weight to all the items on the welfare check list. The judge who emphasised the voice of the child, like the guardians valued contact which she saw as linked to identity. This in turn, she linked to enhancing stability of placement. This strongly held belief was in direct conflict with the law on adoption, with which she struggles. All were conscious of the highest context for them - the Court of Appeal - although two focused primarily on concerns about stability, safety and identity, based on their experiences in this area. One judge attempted to enforce the law as paramount even though it might contradict with his personal view of what was right. The discourse used in explaining this position was that ultimately the law is there to protect, and should be upheld as paramount. Something that sat more comfortably with judge one than three.

As a group, this was probably the most diverse, yet each believed themselves as applying the same set of principles. Each account was strongly influenced by personal experiences. At times these appeared to conflict with the principle of law as being paramount in decision making, at others not. When this happened the views of "experts" were employed to help organise their thinking, not those of parents.

All participants

Overall the guardians presented the most pro-contact group and explained this as being congruent with their role of the child's advocate, in which identity was central. The experts presented a more central, although generally pro-contact group, in which the capacity and needs of parents were emphasised. This is understood in terms of the professional context of working clinically with parents and children. Their reservations about contact and emphasis on safety may be linked to working with children who have been abused severely and in the context of placement break down. The judges were more mixed although clear that they had a duty to apply the law in which the need for children to maintain their family identity is emphasised. Although generally pro-contact they varied in their confidence in whether this was always in the best interests of the child. This lack of shared views may also be linked to the somewhat isolated position of judges, with the exception of the magistrate, who rarely see one another work, or receive feedback about their decisions.

All the participants spoke of the difficulties of making decisions, when the future is unknown and hard to predict, given the changing nature of relationships.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF MEANING

As mentioned earlier, Pearce and Cronen, (1980), proposed a model called "The coordinated management of meaning", in which they identified six levels of meaning-creating contexts. These contexts inter-relate with each other, so that meaning arising out of one level of context is affected by another, in a recursive manner. The themes or beliefs identified in this research contain meanings from each of the different levels identified by

Pearce and Cronen. For example, socio-cultural beliefs, based on the legal system; professional beliefs based on the ethos of the agency; more individualistic professional views based on experience and training; personal beliefs about the role of parents in relation to children based on family beliefs and particular experiences and relationships as these are created. These multi-layered contexts may at times be in contradiction to one another. In applying these ideas to contact Lindsey (1995a), suggests that these contradictions account for much of the confusion and conflict that surrounds contact. This seems to be helpful in understanding contradictions in the research literature, in which similar findings appear to be used, to support both the position for and against contact. Here the socio-cultural norms (the highest and most general of contexts), influencing different groups may be seen as in conflict with one another. These norms are built up from beliefs derived from other contexts, so that the practice of professionals will be affected by their own life history and training, as well as the contexts, e.g. implementing the law; representing the child and assessing the roles of all concerned, in which they work. For example, the salient themes of attachment; identity and protection appear at times to be linked and at others, in contradiction to one another. Each may be seen as operating at the socio-cultural level and played out at and influenced by the feedback from other levels. These levels of context can therefore be helpful in understanding how these beliefs organise the work of professionals. Confusions arise when beliefs at different contextual levels or within one level appear to be in conflict. For judge three, the legal system (socio-cultural level) which emphasises contact with birth parents and duty to apply the law (agency level), appeared to conflict with her views on safety (socio-cultural; professional and personal levels). Similarly for the guardians, the central importance of

contact in relation to identity appeared to conflict at times with concerns about safety. Within each level of context there also appeared to be a range of discourses available. For one of the guardians particular outcome research and her experiences as a parent, were used to resolve some of the contradictions she experienced about contact and safety. This guardian may be understood as employing an “expert”, socially sanctioned and therefore powerful discourse of research in an attempt to argue her position. Here the professional demands on an individual are seen as having a strong influence on other levels of meaning, which in turn are influenced themselves, e.g. life experiences, contributing to the construction of the professional context.

Neither the direction of influence, or it's effect, are pre-determined. One of the guardian's belief in contact (socio-cultural norm), appears to contradict with her experience of a potentially unsafe contact (episode), yet her belief in contact remains. In contrast for one of the judge's her concern about failing children (life script, a lower norm), appears to result in her questioning her understanding of and the usefulness of an aspect of the law (socio-cultural norm). The experts demonstrated how their theoretical orientations were influenced by their personal experiences and trainings, often mediated by particular relationships and meanings. For one, to give an independent assessment of the needs of an individual child,(socio-cultural and agency norms), contradicted with the impact of resources for others (professional and agency norms). The discourses employed in struggling with this dilemma were linked to other beliefs at these levels e.g. the imperative from the Children Act to work in partnership. Another dealt with a similar issue by arguing the importance of being “independent”.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH.

The views of those interviewed are central to decisions that are made about the lives of others in the context of care proceedings. This includes decisions about whether children placed away from their birth parents permanently, should have contact with them or other family members. Those about whom these decisions are made, both parents and children, are particularly vulnerable. They often have multiple problems which may take many years to diminish; have experienced poor parenting; suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect and have experienced many changes of placement and carer. Given the particular characteristics of this group it seems essential that the process of decision-making and the complex range of influences on this begin to be understood. Important contexts for contact have been created by legislation. How the law is enacted by the Court, Social Services policies, and the range of professionals involved, will be effected by their life histories, experiences and their child care theories and research. Beliefs about parenting and separation will affect the two sets of parents ability to maintain contact and how they relate to the children involved. Hence this complex set of inter-relationships will determine both decisions about contact and the success of this in the longer term. These experiences in themselves will further affect relationships, practice and beliefs, in future assessments.

These findings have begun the process of exploring the underlying beliefs professionals have and the influences that are central to this process of assessing for and deciding about contact. Even with this small sample there are many differences in what is considered to be most important in making decisions that can have such wide reaching and long lasting implications.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Many of the participants spoke of the lack of predictability of what will make contact work, or not, particularly in the light of unknown information e.g. the availability and nature of potentially available carers. Assessments at the stage of care proceedings seem to be only the beginning of a lengthy process, working with some of the most vulnerable children and families. From the author's experience, for some experts this is also the beginning of work with social services, in planning to meet the needs of these children and families. Often this is not the case, as with joint instruction, the "expert" must be seen to be independent of all parties and is not generally involved after the proceedings. This is often left, if requested, to other clinicians who have not been involved in the often complex process that led up to a particular decision. This is also true for social workers, a case often being passed onto another worker or team to implement a decision they were not party to. The commitment to such decisions is not surprisingly, variable, with vulnerable children and families feeling as uncertain and powerless as before. It seems that assessments for care proceedings and then for placement and of potential carers, should be carried out separately, by the same professionals, to ensure a greater sense of continuity and commitment in the professionals.

Given the importance placed by the participants on both sets of parents capacity to work together, recommendations should attend to what might facilitate the development of that relationship, in the future. From this research the views of the alternative carers was felt to be central to this. This may involve a degree of "matching", in terms of shared values and beliefs e.g about parenting and the importance of origins. Similar considerations should be given to future parent/child relationships as well. Although not

addressed directly by this research, from a recent study (Quinton et al. 1998) it has been suggested that many placement difficulties arose because of a mismatch between parents' style and children's needs.

What is described here indicates a huge demand on alternative carers and the resources of local authorities. In order to sustain contact birth parents may require a high level of support, at a time when professionals are melting away. However, the costs in terms of placement break down and children drifting in care, with the subsequent emotional, educational and social difficulties that follow, may be higher.

This research project was designed as a starting point from which, the outcomes of decisions about contact may be evaluated. This first stage has been to begin a process of examining the influences on different professionals in reaching decisions. A framework developed by social constructionists, the "co-ordinated management of meaning", has been useful in understanding the different meaning-creating contexts which affect the ways in which professionals think about and act in relation to contact. There are some shared beliefs within and across professional groups, which may at times conflict with other strongly held beliefs. Professionals need to be aware of these discourses and alert to their role in decision-making, in order to evaluate their own performance. The participants of this research will receive feedback of the findings. Other opportunities for feedback in the form of group training and information sharing is indicated.

Further research.

Further research is required to explore influences on decision-making in a larger sample of participants. The views of other key professionals such as social workers should also be included. The "voices" of parents and children are also missing, a detailed

exploration of the meaning of contact to them, and how it is experienced, would be valuable. To date research has focused primarily on parent satisfaction in relation to contact, and placement stability and breakdown, often with self selecting groups of individuals.

CONCLUSION

This present study represents the beginning of an exploration of the beliefs and assumptions that affect professional decision making about contact between children in alternative permanent care and their birth parents. The emphasis was to begin to understand the meanings that influence professional assessments and decision-making, and how these meanings are used to present their views and argue a particular case. Shared meanings within and between a professional groups were examined, whilst individual meanings were retained. The sample size was small and the group not representative. However, a number of similarities as well as differences between individuals and groups emerged, which were considered in the light of outcome research and a social constructionist perspective. This is a fruitful avenue of research that can be developed further.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, M.D.S., Blehar, M. C. Waters, E. & Hall, S. (1978). Patterns of Attachment: a psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ainsworth, M.D.S.(1991). Attachments and other affectional bonds across the life cycle. In C. Parkes. J. Stevenson-Hinde. & P. Marris. (Eds). Attachment Across The Life Cycle. London: Routledge.
- Apter, T. (1996). Expert Witness : Who controls the psychologist's narrative? In R. Josselson. (Ed). Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives. London : Sage.
- Argent, H. (1988). Keeping the doors open. London : B.A.A.F.
- Baker, A.(1995). What constitutes reasonable contact . In P. Reder. & C. Lucy. (Eds). Assessment of parenting : psychiatric and psychological contributions. London : Routledge.
- Barth, R. & Berry, M. (1988). Adoption and disruption : Rates, risks and responses. New York : Aldine DeGruyter.
- Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an ecology of mind. New York : Chandler.
- Beck, M. (1994). The reality of face-to-face contact after adoption. Adoption and Fostering, 18, No;2, 39-43.
- Berry, M. (1991). The effects of open adoption on biological and adoptive parents and the children : The arguments and the evidence. Child Welfare, 70, (6), 637-651.
- Berry, M. (1993). Adoptive parents perceptions of, and comfort with, open adoption. Child Welfare, 72(3), 231-253.
- Bouchier, P., Lambert, L. & Triseliotis, J. (1991). Parting with a child for adoption. London : B.A.A.F.
- Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 39, 1-23.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and Loss. Vol 1. New York : Basic books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). A Secure Base. London : Routledge.
- Bretherton, I. (1995). The origins of attachment theory : John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. In S. Goldberg. R. Muir. & J. Kerr. (Eds) Attachment theory :

- social, developmental and clinical perspectives. London : The Analytic Press.
- Brodinsky, D. M., Schechter, M. D. & Henig, R. M. (1992). Being Adopted. New York : Doubleday.
- Brodinsky, D. M. (1993). Long-term outcome in adoption. The future of children, 33 (1), 153-66.
- Burr, V. (1995). An introduction to social constructionism. London : Routledge.
- Byng - Hall, J. & Lindsey, C. (1988). Family therapy : Work with families in late adoption. In H. Argent Keeping the doors open. London : B.A.A.F.
- Byng - Hall, J. (1991). The application of attachment theory to understanding and treatment in family therapy. In C. M. Parkes. J. Stevenson-Hinde. & P. Marris. (Eds). Attachment Across The Life Cycle. London : Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (1995). Grounded theory. In J. A. Smith. R. Harre. & L. Van Langenhove. (Eds). Rethinking methods in psychology. London : Sage.
- Department of Health. (1991). The Children Act 1989. London : H.M.S.O.
- Dominick, C. (1988). Early contact in adoption. Research series 10. Wellington N.Z : Department of Social Welfare.
- Edwards, D. & Potter, J. (1992). Discursive Psychology. London : Sage.
- Fratter, J., Rowe, J., Sapsford, D. & Thoburn, J. (Eds). (1991). Permanent Family Placement. London : B.A.A.F.
- Fratter, J. (1991). Parties in the triangle. Adoption and Fostering, 15, (4), 91-98.
- Fratter, J. (1996). Adoption with Contact. London : B.A.A.F.
- Foucault, M. (1976). The history of sexuality. Harmondsworth : Penguin.
- Gergen, K. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. American Psychologist, 40, 266-275.
- Gergen, K. (1989). Warranting voice and the elaboration of the self. In J. Shotter. & K. Gergen. (Eds). Texts of identity. London : Sage.
- George, C., Kaplan, N. & Main, M. (1984). Adult attachment interview. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkley.
- Gross, H. (1993). Open adoption : A Research Based Literature Review and New Data. Child Welfare, 72, 3, 269 - 284.

- Hall, G. (1991). Adoption and contact with birth families. Adoption and Fostering, 15, 3, 40-42.
- Henwood, K. L. & Pidgeon, N. F. (1992). Qualitative research and psychological theorising. British Journal of Psychology, 83, 97-111.
- Hilliard, R. B. (1993). Single-case methodology in psychology process and outcome research. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 61, No. 3. 373-380.
- Hinde, R. A. & Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1991). Perspectives on attachment. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris. (Eds). Attachment Across The Life Cycle. London : Routledge.
- Hill, M., Lambert, L. & Triseliotis, J. (1989). Achieving adoption with love and money. London : National Children's Bureau.
- Honos-Webb, L., Stiles, W. B., Greenberg, L. S. & Goldman, R. (1998). Assimilation analysis of process-experiential psychotherapy : A comparison of two cases. Psychotherapy Research, 8, (3), 264-286.
- Hughes, B. & Logan, J. (1993). Birth parents : The hidden dimension. University of Manchester : Department of Social Policy and Social Work.
- Hughes, B. (1995). Openness and contact in adoption : A child centred perspective. British Journal of Social Work, 25, 729-747.
- Ivanek, M. A. (1987). A study of open adoption. New Zealand : Petone.
- Jarman, M., Smith, J. & Walsh, S. (1997). The psychological battle for control : A qualitative study of health-care professionals' understandings of the treatment of anorexia nervosa. Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 7, 137-152.
- Kadushin, A. & Martin, J. (1988). Adopting older children. New York : Macmillan.
- Lambert, L., Buist, M., Triseliotis, J. & Hill, M. (1990). Freeing children for adoption. London : B.A.A.F.
- Lindsey, C. (1995a). Systemic and developmental aspects of contact. In H. Argent. (Ed). See you soon. London : B.A.A.F.
- Lindsey, C. (1995b) Alternative Caretakers. In P. Reder. & C. Lucy. (Eds). Assessment of parenting : psychiatric and psychological contributions. London : Routledge.

- Main, M., Kaplan, N. & Cassidy, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood and adulthood : A move to the level of representation. In I. Bretherton. & E. Waters. (Eds). Growing Points of Attachment Theory and Research. Monographs of the society for research in child development, serial No; 129, 50, Nos; 1-2, 66-104.
- Marvin, R. S. & Stewart, B. (1990). A family systems framework for the study of attachment. In Parkes. C. M. Stevenson-Hinde. J. & P. Marris. (Eds) Attachment Across The Life Cycle. Routledge : London.
- Mason, K. & Selman, P. (1997). Birth parents experience of contested adoption. Adoption and Fostering, 21, 1, 21-28.
- McRoy, R., Grotevant, H. & White, K. (1988). Openness in adoption : New practices, new issues. New York : Routledge.
- Millham, S., Bullock, R., Hosie, K. & Haak. M. (1986). Lost in care. Aldershot : Gower.
- Osborne, M. & Smith, J. A. (1998). The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain : An interpretative phenomenological analysis. British Journal of Health Psychology, 3, 65-83.
- Pearce, W.B. & Cronen, V.E. (1980). Communication Action and Meaning : The Creation of Social Realities. New York : Praeger.
- Parker, I. (1982). Discourse dynamics : Critical analysis for social and individual psychology. London : Routledge.
- Parker, I. (1996). Qualitative research. In P. Bannister. E. Burman. I. Parker. M. Taylor. & C. Tindall.(Eds). Qualitative methods in psychology. A research guide. Buckingham : Open University.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). Discourse and social psychology : Beyond attitudes and behaviour. London : Sage.
- Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. & Mayes. D. (1997). Contact between children placed away from home and their birth parents : Research issues and evidence. Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2, no. 3, 393-413.
- Quinton,D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. & Mayes, D. (1998). Joining new families. Chichester : Wiley.
- Robertson, J. & Robertson, J. (1997). The Psychological Parent. Adoption and Fostering, 87,19-21.
- Ryburn, M. (1994). Contact after contested adoptions. Adoption and Fostering, 18, 4, 30-37.

- Sants, H. (1964). Genealogical bewilderment in children with substitute parents. British Journal of Medical Psychology, 37, 133-141.
- Schaffer, H. R. (1990). Making decisions about children. Oxford : Blackwell.
- Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse : Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. Psychology and Health, 11, 261-271.
- Smith, J. A. (1997). Evolving issues for qualitative research. In T. E. Richardson. (Ed). Handbook of qualitative research methods. Leicester : BPS Books.
- Smith, J. A., Osborn, M. & Jarman, M. (in press). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray. & K. Chamberlain. (Eds). Qualitative Health Psychology. London : Sage.
- Smith, G. (1995). Do children have the right to leave their pasts behind them ? Contact with children who have been abused. In H. Argent.(Ed) See you soon. London : B.A.A.F.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). Qualitative analysis for social scientists. New York : Cambridge University Press.
- Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1990). Attachment within family systems : An overview. Infant Mental Health Journal, 11, No;3, 218-227.
- Thoburn, J. (1990). Success and Failure in Permanent Family Placement. Aldershot : Gower.
- Tizard, B. (1979). Adopting older children from institutions. Child Abuse and Neglect, 3, 355-358.
- Triseliotis, J. (1973). In Search of Origins. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Triseliotis, J. (1983). Identity and security in adoption and long term fostering. Adoption and Fostering, 7, 1, 22-31.
- Triseliotis, J. (1991). Open adoption. In A. Mullender. (Ed). Open adoption : the philosophy and practise. London : B.A.A.F.
- Triseliotis, J., Shireman, J. & Hundleby, M. (1997). Adoption theory, policy and practice. London : Cassell.
- Wedge, P. & Mantle, G. (1991). Sibling groups and social work. University of East Anglia : Department of Social Work.

LIST OF APPENDICIES

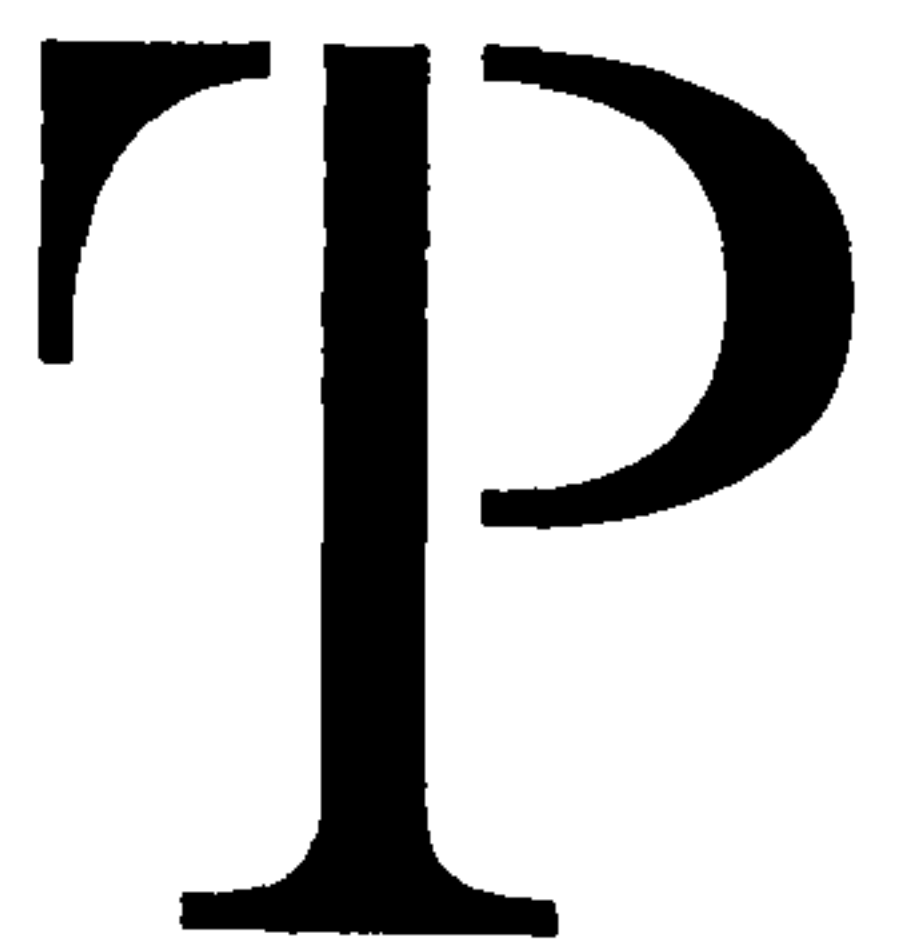
- I Notice of ethical approval**
- II Research diary**
- III Interview schedules for experts and guardians**
- IV Interview schedule for judges**
- V Letter of introduction to the study**
- VI Consent form**
- VII Samples of data summary letters**
- VIII Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of agreement**
- IX Samples of summaries of analyses**

APPENDIX I

NOTICE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

THE TAVISTOCK & PORTMAN NHS TRUST

ADULT DEPARTMENT
TAVISTOCK CLINIC
120 BELSIZE LANE
LONDON NW3 5BA
TELEPHONE 0171 435 7111



Ms Rita Harris
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Child and Family Department
Tavistock Clinic

24th July 1998

Dear Ms Harris,

Re: Proposal - The construction of professional beliefs about contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents

I am pleased to inform you that the above proposal has now received formal ethical approval.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Lucy Ettinger', is written above the typed name.

Lucy Ettinger
Secretary to Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX II

DISSERTATION

RESEARCH DIARY

OCTOBER 1998 - APRIL 1999

October 1st, 1998.

1. What are my hypotheses?
2. What assumptions am I making?
3. What am I hoping to find?

1. H1. Assessments of whether contact should take place and in what form, between children in permanent alternative care, and their birth parents, is based on the beliefs held by those involved

H2. Professionals will be influenced by, and will draw upon the arguments from theoretical models such as attachment theory and contextual influences including legislation and local constraints such as the resources available.

H3. People from the same profession will share certain beliefs about contact.

H4. People from different professional groups/positions will have differing beliefs about contact.

2. I am assuming that given the lack of clarity in the literature, and the ways in which similar evidence appears to be used to argue different points of view, there will be some marked differences in the beliefs professionals hold about contact.

I am assuming that professionals will draw on theoretical models such as attachment and identity theory and will be influenced by what is expected of them by their agency.

I am also assuming that these differences will be more marked between, rather than within professional groups.

I am assuming that professionals will be influenced by a range of assumptions which maybe hierarchically ordered and influence one another in a recursive way.

I am also assuming that some individuals will be more articulate and skilful than others in arguing their positions.

3. I am hoping that this research will begin the process of understanding what influences recommendations and decisions about contact between children and their parents, who they are placed away from, as a starting point for beginning to explore the outcomes of these decisions. I am also hoping that this will lead on to an exploration of the meaning and experience of contact to those most affected by it i.e. children, their parents, the families involved and social workers who are expected to work with the decisions made. I

am also hoping that by making explicit the assumptions and beliefs held by professionals, this will enable them to examine these and the role they play more explicitly.

October 2nd 1998.

First interview carried out. I stumbled with the tape recorder, but luckily the participant was very patient. I was struck by her openness and generosity in answering my questions so fully. It felt like a privilege to be able to interview her. I failed to follow up some of the replies and didn't probe as deeply as I might have done. I'm concerned that some of my questions are rather repetitive. Also she was very clear that she would have answered some of my questions differently, if she had not checked out my views prior to the interview. I took this to mean a less openly. Meaning certainly seems to be constructed in language and in interaction!

I am left with some questions - are the questions clear enough or too repetitive?
The idea of an apprenticeship model came across strongly. Is this covered adequately in the questions?
What is the effect of my position on the interview?

15th October, 1998.

I was trying to write my literature review today and arrange further interviews. It's interesting how, as I re-read much of what influenced my earlier ideas, these are developing. I've realised that although I strongly hold the view that the views of adoptive parents should be included in assessments, I don't think I've given much space for this in the interview schedule.

23rd October, 1998.

Interviewed a guardian today. I was surprised by how she used the "expert" status of research to justify and endorse her views, and those of others who share similar views. I wondered if all my interviews will tap this.

I have a question - how do individuals claim "warrant" for their views? What discourses do they employ?

28th October 1998.

I spoke to a judge today. Her view is that the judiciary treat adoptive parents as "second only to God" and will always comply with their wishes. She contrasted this to contact in private law cases, e.g. when a mother does not want a child to have contact with an abusive father. The Children Act says that contact should be encouraged. Is this a gender issue or are birth parents, whether in care proceedings or not, not considered to have a legitimate view?

29th October 1998.

In interviewing the other judges, I am left wondering about my own expertise. How difficult it must be for parents who are struggling not to lose the care of, all contact with their children, to feel competent.

13th November 1998.

Interviewed another guardian today. I found her criticism of the role of "experts" rather unsettling. Again, very illuminating in terms of the research she draws on, all pro-contact, as were the other guardians. I wonder what affect my role and where I work had on what she chose to tell me. My view of guardians is shifting. I certainly see them as less "neutral" and "open-minded" than before.

7th December, 1998.

Interviewed two more judges today. Although both believe very strongly that their own views were not important and that they worked within the constraints of the law, both seemed to interpret this in different ways, particularly in the detail. Both were very pro-contact, except one is worried about it and the other thinks it should never happen in adoption, but nearly always in foster care. There also seemed to be a gender issue, with the male judge indicating a high degree of empathy with the "non-residential parent", generally the father. The views of the children did not feature highly at all.

Question - everyone to date has described their role as a "child focused", but few, so far have mentioned the views of children.

19th December 1998.

Two more experts interviewed today. I have found interviewing those that I perceived to be closest to my own position, particularly difficult. I have found it hard to be neutral and not express my own views, especially when they say something that I agree with particularly strongly. I am aware of how easy it would be to take a judgmental position and keep wondering how the participants see my role. They may well be offering me views they think I want, or will influence my view of them in a particular way. Only one person has responded to the question about the effect of my role on the interview, the first expert. Everyone else has denied any affect.

22nd December, 1998.

The last guardian, and first black participant. Issues of race and racial identity were high on her agenda, more so than with any one else so far. It's interesting how much of one's experiences we bring to what we do, however open-minded and neutral we claim to be. I realised how much lower these issues are on my list of priorities, than on hers, when

carrying out an assessment for contact. The conflict guardians experience in relation to social services has emerged in all three interviews with them.

3rd February 1999.

Reading and re-reading the transcripts of the interviews, I am very conscious of the leads I follow, and those I don't. The latter maybe because it can appear as very challenging. This seems to be much harder than when working on therapeutically with children and families. I'm left wondering whether this is an issue of sanction i.e. a therapeutic contract makes it possible; power and authority i.e. I am socially constructed as an "expert"; or being too close to those interviewed and unable to see differences when the fit is too good.

Also some of the questions in the interview reflect my assumptions e.g. assuming everyone carries out an assessment. The guardians refer to their work as an investigation. How much do I miss by starting from the position I do? Even with pre-written questions, I am increasingly aware of how organised I am by the feedback I receive.

I am feeling very worried about the data analysis. How will I ever organise this much material?

18th February, 1999.

I have been revising my ideas about my data analysis. I began, hoping to use some of the ideas from discourse analysis. However, I am concerned about the loss of individual voices, and the possibility that some constructions or beliefs are held quite firmly and exist over time. I have been reading papers by Jonathan Smith and am feeling that I P A will be more helpful. It's a fit that mirrors my own position as both a psychologist and systemic therapist, who spends a lot of time unravelling the stories people tell about their lives.

I have been struck by how pro-contact the guardians staff, almost at "any cost". The experts seem to take a more middle, possibly more neutral line, but is this just my view? They varied in their awareness of and how much importance they placed on, the wider context, and the degrees to which they felt responsible for this.

I'm getting very worried about issues of confidentiality. The pool from which the respondents have come is quite small, and much of what they say could identify them. They have also been very open about personal influences. Although extremely rich and illuminating I think I shall have to leave a lot of that out.

20th February 1999.

The coding of the interviews seems to be getting clearer. I find that if I reflect on the story I feel that they are trying to convey to me, it's easier. Rather like clinical work.

Two issues that I feel are having a strong influence on the narratives:

- a). Qualitative differences between how those who are, and those who are not, parents, talk about the needs of children.
- b). Power issues seem to be always there, but rarely spelled out.

21st February, 1999.

In carrying out the data analysis, a lot of the richness of detail seems to get lost. I really want to represent those I interviewed fairly, and not lose the unique essence of their views.

24th February, 1999.

I have been reflecting on the research the guardians emphasise and my discomfort with it. The samples they interview in this research are very different to those we see clinically. They are generally not clinical samples, not the more worrying court cases that come our way. This may be why this research seems less applicable to the experts.

I have also become increasingly aware of the limitations inherent in making assessments at a fixed point in time. Many of those interviewed mentioned the relationship between both sets of parents. At the stage of care proceedings, one of these is as yet unknown.

26th February, 1999.

Had someone do have an independent audit trail on one of the interviews today. I was very anxious. However, it was both reassuring and interesting. They were able to see how I reached my conclusions. We had an interesting discussion about the themes, agreeing that some of the quotes could fall into more than one category. Themes embedded in themes. It's difficult to know when to stop the analysis. I also worry now about the sample size. It seems so inadequate for such a large topic.

4th March, 1999.

Sent off summery letters to all the respondents today. This was really helpful in clarifying my ideas about the themes. Again I struck by the importance of personal influences in making decisions about people who have had a very different life experiences to those who assess them.

12th March, 1999.

I have had several phone calls from participants in response to their summary letters. They were all very positive and I was glad to have taken so much care over them. I am anxious again about the final write up and sending them all a summary, both in terms of confidentiality and not appearing to be critical. I appreciate the struggles they have in trying to reach the best conclusion for each child.

14th March 1999.

I'm spending most of my time writing up now, or so it seems. The family have gone away for two weekends now, and I am immersed in themes and tables of themes. I've sent the first drafts of some of my analysis to my supervisor. I have left a lot of what was said in the draft, and it is very long. It does seem important though, to truly catch the meaning of what people said

21st March, 1999.

Last weekend before the school holidays, and I am racing. I've just seen a new book by David Quinton and colleagues, summarising their research. They have found some predictive or risk factors in relation to placement breakdown. Children rejected by their birth parents seem to often have the poorest prognosis, perhaps because they in turn are often fairly unresponsive. Back to attachment theory again and matching children to families.

6th April 1999.

I have sent a final draft in my supervisor and am awaiting comments. I feel frustrated that so much material has had to be taken out and am worried about what has been lost. Will I be representing the participants fairly? The word limit is frustrating, although it may also be my difficulty in being succinct. This has been an exciting and at times daunting experience. However, myself and a colleague have just written a proposal to look at the meaning of contact to children and families and how they experience it. My trainee has started interviewing social workers. So who knows what next.

APPENDIX III

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE : EXPERTS AND GUARDIANS BELIEFS ABOUT CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND THEIR BIRTH PARENTS.

Section 1 : Introduction to the study

Thank-you for agreeing to take part in this study. As you will know from the information I sent to you about the study I am a member of a clinical team working in the area of adoption and fostering at the Tavistock clinic and this particular piece of research is for my doctorate. When the study is complete I shall be sending every one who took part in it a summary of the findings.

As you will know from the earlier information, my interest is in exploring professionals' views about contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents. In particular I am interested in what influences you and others in terms of your professional contexts, trainings and experiences in this area and the knowledge and theoretical models you may draw upon.

Section 2 : Their context.

1. Can you describe your work context and role within it to me?
Could you map it out for me on paper?
2. Could you tell me at what stage of proceedings you become involved?
Prompt : how do requests for assessments reach you, from whom etc. A flow chart may be helpful.
3. Who else is involved in doing this work with you?
4. How many of these assessments would you carry out, on average, a year?

Section 3 : General question re : influences.

1. Where would you put yourself on a line of being for or against contact?
2. What do you think influences people making assessments/decisions about contact?
3. Which of these things do you think influence you in particular (what do you draw on)?
4. Could you outline for me how you approach an assessment?
Prompt : tests used, frameworks etc.
5. How might your answer about contact be different if I was to ask you about birth relatives?

Section 4 : (A) Theme 1 Theoretical models.

1. What theoretical models/frameworks do you use in making assessments about contact?
Prompt : attachment/systemic/identity formation.
2. What evidence do you look for? What are the indicators for and against contact?
Prompt : factors in relation to the child e.g. age, family of origin ,previous experiences and in relation to the adults e.g. previous behaviour and experiences and attitudes.
3. What arguments do you use?
4. What do you use in arguing for or against contact, other than theoretical ideas?

(B) Theme 2 Past experience.

1. From your experience of doing this work, what experiences/particular cases have been influential in your thinking about contact?
2. What aspects of decision making about contact challenge you the most?
3. What are your explanations about this?

(D) Theme 3 Professional context.

1. What other issues do you consider to be important when making decisions about contact?
Prompt : resources, previous knowledge of local authority, parental health, age of the child etc.
2. What role does the views of others involved have on your position?
3. Does your position differ to that of your agency? If so in what ways?
4. What influence has changes in legislation had on your practise, if any?

Section 5 : Reflections on the interview

1. Having discussed your views and current practise in relation to contact is there anything that is particularly striking to you?
2. Is there any thing you would like to add?

BREAK IN THE INTERVIEW

Section 6 : A case

1. Could you describe an interesting case that has puzzled you/caused you particular concern in this area?
2. What were the main issues for you?

Section 8 : Ending.

1. If I were to ask you the question about your position in relation to contact again, what would your answer be?

2. Do you think that there are any personal experiences that influence you in this area and that you draw on?
3. Do you think that this interview has been influenced in any way by your perception of my role and where I work?
4. Is there anything you would like to add?
5. I will be contacting everyone with a written summary of the interview. Would you like to/be prepared to discuss this further?

APPENDIX IV

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE : JUDGES BELIEFS ABOUT CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND THEIR BIRTH PARENTS.

Section 1 : Introduction to the study

Thank-you for agreeing to take part in this study. As you will know from the information I sent to you about the study I am a member of a clinical team working in the area of adoption and fostering at the Tavistock clinic and this particular piece of research is for my doctorate. When the study is complete I shall be sending every one who took part in it a summary of the findings.

As you will know from the earlier information, my interest is in exploring professionals' views about contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents. In particular I am interested in what influences you and others in terms of your professional contexts, trainings and experiences in this area and the knowledge and theoretical models you may draw upon.

Section 2 : Their context.

For Judges

1. What kind of court do you mainly sit in? Could you describe your work context and roles?
2. What sorts of directions are you likely to give in order to assist you in coming to a judgement?

Prompt : what types of reports/assessments do you seek.

3. What are your impressions about what influences professionals in coming to their conclusions?
4. What informs your decision making?

Prompt : what has the most influence for you in reaching a judgement, what convinces you e.g. the knowledge base people draw on, the ways in which parents present in court etc.

Section 3 : General question re : influences.

1. Where would you put yourself on a line of being for or against contact?
2. What do you think influences people making assessments/decisions about contact?
3. Which of these things do you think influence you in particular (what do you draw on)?

Section 4 : (A) Theme 1 Theoretical models.

1. What evidence do you look for? What are the indicators for and against contact?

Prompt : factors in relation to the child e.g. age, family of origin ,previous experiences and in relation to the adults e.g. previous behaviour and experiences and attitudes.

2. What arguments do you use?
3. What do you use other than theoretical ideas?

(B) Theme 2 Past experience.

1. From your experience of doing this work, what experiences/particular cases have been influential in your thinking about contact?
2. What aspects of decision making about contact challenge you the most?
3. What are your explanations about this?

(D) Theme 3 Professional context.

1. What other issues do you consider to be important when making decisions about contact?
Prompt : resources, previous knowledge of local authority, parental health, age of the child etc.
2. What role does the views of others involved have on your position?
3. Does your position differ to that of others in your position? If so in what ways?

Section 5 : Reflections on the interview

1. Having discussed your views and current practice in relation to contact is there anything that is particularly striking to you?
2. Is there any thing you would like to add?

BREAK IN THE INTERVIEW

Section 6 : A case

1. Could you describe an interesting case that has puzzled you/caused you particular concern in this area?
2. What were the main issues for you?

Section 8 : Ending.

1. If I were to ask you the question about your position in relation to contact again what would your answer be?
2. Do you think that there are any personal experiences that influence you in this area and that you draw on?
3. Do you think that this interview has been influenced in any way by your perception of my role and where I work?
4. Is there anything you would like to add?
5. I will be contacting everyone with a written summary of the interview. Would you like to/be prepared to discuss this further?

APPENDIX V

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Dear

I am writing to you, (at the suggestion of)as someone who would be prepared to be interviewed about the issue of whether children placed away from their birth parents should continue to have contact with them.

I work clinically as a member of a multi-disciplinary team at the Tavistock Clinic working in the area of adoption and fostering. The team consists of Dr. Caroline Lindsey, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, Lorraine Tollemache, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, and myself, Consultant Clinical Psychologist. A substantial part of our work is requests for assessments in relation to whether children placed in permanent substitute care should continue to have contact with their birth parents and if so in what form. I am particularly interested in the positions professionals start from in making assessments and decisions in this area and this work will be submitted for my doctorate. In order to do this I shall be interviewing a number of professionals working in the area including social workers, Guardian ad Litems, those giving expert opinions and judges, and hope that you will agree to being one of these. I envisage the interview lasting for about one and a half hours, with a short break within that time.

The interview is designed to look at what influences you and others in relation to contact between children living in permanent substitute care and their birth parents. I shall be asking you to describe aspects of your role in relation to these cases. I shall also be hoping to gain your views about contact between these children and their birth parents and what in your view influences both yourself and others in coming to particular conclusions. I would also welcome hearing about any additional ideas that you have that are not covered in the interview.

I shall be tape recording the interviews, which will then be transcribed. The information will be completely confidential. When the research is complete the tapes will be erased and the transcripts destroyed, or returned to participants. I shall be sending every-one interviewed a summary of the findings. I very much hope that you will agree to taking part in this study and will follow this letter up with a telephone call, when we can discuss this further.

With best wishes/Yours sincerely

Rita Harris
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

APPENDIX VI

CONSENT FORM

This is a form given to all participants, to confirm that you give your consent to be interviewed by me, Rita Harris, about your views in relation to contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents.

Please read this and sign underneath:

I have read through the information provided about this research and have discussed any concerns I have about it. I give my consent to be interviewed and for the interviews to be audio-taped. I understand that these tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed and that the transcripts will be destroyed, once the research is completed. I understand that the information obtained may be used in publication of the research, in a way that ensures total anonymity of participants. I understand that I can withdraw from the research process at any point. I understand that while in the possession of the researcher, any tapes, transcripts or notes relating to what I have said will be kept in a safe place.

Signed:

Date:

APPENDIX VII

SAMPLES OF SUMMARIES OF DATA SUMMARY LETTERS

Dear

Re: Contact between children in alternative care and their birth parents

Thank-you again for taking part in this study and for talking to me about your views in relation to contact between children in permanent substitute care and their birth parents. As promised I am writing to you with a summary of my impressions of this interview. I have listed the main themes as I saw them, and have then described my understanding of these. I grouped the themes under the following:

- identity as central, and the role of contact in that
- the importance of and limitations of birth parents
- responsibility
- different positions and views
- child focused positions

I gained a clear sense of responsibility you feel in ensuring that a clear picture of each individual child is obtained. A child focused stance was central to your thinking, which could at times result in your feeling at odds with the Local Authority. At times they could appear to have more fixed attitudes, linked to policies and procedures.

From the onset you begin to establish what the issues will be and start a process of matching, both in terms of work and your choice of additional expertise such as the solicitor you choose. I was left with a strong impression of how important you see sense of identity as being for each child, in which their history and family of origin have a part to play. You therefore saw the issue of contact as being central, particularly between siblings. You would be looking for placements for children, where contact would be possible. You also saw limitations to contact, which included unreliable parents; mental illness in parents; violence and abuse and sometimes if the child is very young. You saw contact as having different functions in different situations and find yourself struggling, on occasion, with the benefits of contact and openness versus issues of safety.

Thank-you again. It was a privilege talking to you. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this summary with you briefly over the 'phone. Perhaps I could ring you over the next few days for your response.

Yours sincerely

Rita Harris
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Dear

Re: Contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents

Thank-you again for taking part in this study and for talking to me about your views in relation to contact between children in permanent substitute care and their birth parents. As promised I am writing to you with a summary of my impressions of this interview. I have listed the main themes as I saw them, and have then described my understanding of these. I grouped the themes under the following:

- Permanency and secure attachment as crucial
- Protection of children as central
- The importance of origins and identity
- The child's views and wishes
- Opinion versus prejudice
- Contact as representing relationships and processes
- Problems of predictability

You started from a position to seeing contact as generally a good thing so long as certain conditions are met. You were very clear about these and they included ensuring the child's physical and emotional safety; that they were not opposed to contact and that it would not undermine the permanent placement. You were very clear that a secure attachment and sense of permanency were of paramount importance in your thinking about a child's interests/needs. You also suggested that people who held extreme views either for or against contact, were not considering the needs of the child, but rather supporting their own prejudice. You were very sensitive to what you described as the fine line between opinion and prejudice.

Your reasons for seeing contact as being useful, if the conditions outlined above are met were linked to adult studies. You feel that so long as contact did not interfere with new relationships it could help to dispel fantasies about birth parents; reassure children about them and give them valuable information about their biological origins. These seemed to be important for the development and well being of children.

I was particularly struck by how in your view contact reflects the messages children receive about decisions and relationships. It could be used unhelpfully to judge the reality of painful decisions and subsequent losses, or more positively to emphasise the reality of permanence, by being decreased. You saw the question of frequency as being problematic. It often felt like an arbitrary decision; potentially undermining a sense of permanency and being linked to the unpredictability of what the future may bring for each child. You touched generally on problems of predictability to provide what was planned for a particular child and family. Finally, I was aware of the sense of responsibility you feel particularly for younger children, whose views it is hard to

ascertain, and for younger parents. Both groups were felt to be particularly vulnerable.

Thank-you again. It was a privilege talking to you. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this summary with you briefly over the 'phone. Perhaps I could ring you over the next few days for your response.

Yours sincerely

Rita Harris
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Dear

Re: Contact between children in substitute care and their birth parents

Thank-you again for taking part in this study and for talking to me about your views in relation to contact between children in permanent substitute care and their birth parents. As promised I am writing to you with a summary of my impressions of this interview. I have listed the main themes as I saw them, and have then described my understanding of these. I grouped the themes under the following:

- The law as paramount in decision making
- Contact with natural parents is in the interests of children
- The needs of parents versus those of children
- Contact in adoption is not helpful
- Responsibility and accountability
- Gender differences

You clearly see your role as applying the law. Within that framework your starting position is that normally contact with a natural parent is in the interests of the child. The exceptions to this would be if contact posed a threat to a child. In order to assist you in making decisions you have the welfare checklist, within which you give each item equal weighting. In making a decision you are also influenced by how they have thought through the practical implications of what they plan to do. You were also concerned about delays to proceedings, which were often due to lack of resources and at times allegation of abuse by one parent against another. You were generally aware of how difficulties between parents could affect their relationship with the child. You did not see the wishes of the child as having greater weight than other items on the checklist. You did not feel that the views of young children, say below the ages of five or six, could be given the same weight as those of a teenager. You were aware of possible differences in the ways in which you dealt with men and women, but believed this not to be the case. I was aware of the responsibility of your position and you mentioned the inherent risks in making decisions without evaluation of outcome or feedback. You saw this, alongside of the limited resources available following proceedings, as weaknesses of the current system. I was aware of the difficulties for you in enforcing contact orders and dealing with intractable hostility when there may also be based on genuine fear and concern for the child.'

Thank-you again. It was a privilege talking to you. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this summary with you briefly over the 'phone. Perhaps I could ring you over the next few days for your response.

Yours sincerely

Rita Harris
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

APPENDIX VIII

COHEN'S KAPPA COEFFICIENT OF AGREEMENT

Crosstabs

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
RATER1 * RATER2	30	100.0%	0	.0%	30	100.0%

RATER1 * RATER2 Crosstabulation

Count

		RATER2						Total
		1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	
RATER1	1.00	4		1				5
	2.00		4	1				5
	3.00		1	4				5
	4.00	1			4			5
	5.00				1	4		5
	6.00						5	5
Total		5	5	6	5	4	5	30

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error ^a	Approx. T ^b	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.800	.082	9.811	.000
N of Valid Cases		30			

- a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
- b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

APPENDIX IX

SAMPLES OF SUMMARIES OF DATA ANALYSES

Data summary : Tape 4 GAL 2

Themes

1. Contact as most important consideration

- a) When being asked where she stood in relation to contact in principle, p9 line 8 "I'm absolutely more for, I've always been in that continuum".
- b) p9 line 20 "the cut and run theory,.....I was deeply uncomfortable with that".
- c) p12 line 3 "I won't ever say there shouldn't be post box contact....ever....I can think of no circumstances.
- d) p12 line 14 "I begin to query long term fostering versus adoption and I certainly don't automatically assume adoption because I might be recommending contact".
- e) p29 line 8 "all teenage children need contact".
- f) When discussing possible contra indications for contact, p42 line 3 "history of violence.....but where there is no reason to suppose that it's going to be a barrier to the placement the answer must always be yes".
- g) p47 line 7 "I think that my view is that contact is almost always beneficial if the adults involved can agree".
- h) p14 line 10 "I see it as a criteria, they (alternative carers) accept the possibility of some face to face contact".

2. The meaning of contact is to give a sense of identity

- a) p10 line 7 "an older child's history will always lie with his birth family and you can't sever it...and then if you destroy...take that bit of the child's history away, you're damaging it's ability to make a link with it's new family".
- b) p13 line 2 "it's where the child's history lies and where the attachments lie.....even in adoption, a child sort of six, seven, eight....we'll use that as the kind of area, I would still be considering contact".
- c) p14 line 1 "for an adoption or foster placement to really work, the substitute carers have got to take the child and their history, and if they are so unwilling to consider this child's history, to the point that they cannot countenance contact, I say well this may not be the right placement".
- d) p21 line 12 "they(grand parents) would be pleased to have contact with the baby, and I recommended...because this baby was going to need to know something of where she came from".
- e) p25 line 7 "I'm very clear from meeting all these children over the years that contact is important to their sense of identity, the sense of self, all this figures largely in how successful they are in maintaining some integrity of the personality when they get older. A sense of self."
- f) p40 line 2 "the meaning of contact is to give the child a sense of their identity and to maintain a link with the natural parent while being allowed to move on to a new placement".
- g) p49 line 7 "children should gather up all their history, they shouldn't be fragmenting and splitting".

3. Roles/positions of others as being different/unhelpful/conflicting/not valued (includes a general lack of respect for everyone, or of feeling valued).

- a) p4 line 17 "the parents that we're seeing, particularly in care proceedings, there's greater instability.....and so therefore their hostility to authority is much greater and so then you don't always ask about families"
- b) p5 line 10 "I've had two cases recently, I mean one involving a family where you simply can't visit.....the risk factor becomes greater".
- c) p7 line 3 "whether or not any expert is instructed, and one resists it as much as possible".
- d) p7 line 21 "there's a sort of exaggeration about these cases, with multiplicity of experts, I think it doesn't happen as much as people would like to think it does".
- e) p10 line 1 When discussing what influences others, in this case social services "if the parents had been truculent or difficult, they would cut off contact".
- f) p12 line 9 "the local authority argument with an older child, where I might say this child needs to have some contact, they'll argue, well, we can't get a placement if you do".
- g) p13 line 21 "I think family placement workers have a very precious attitude towards their adopters and I find it's not always the child's interests they are serving".
- h) p19 line 10 "you have a parent who in some cases they're just intractable, and there's nothing you can do, and they have to have their say, and it's a waste of public money, but it's civil liberties and you have to go along with it".
- i) p37 line 15 "they'll (local authority) very often use the resources excuse as to why they can't do it".
- j) p42 line 17 "the judge used to say (imitates plummy accent) "What am I to do with these mothers who simply won't let their children see their fathers, what am I to do?"sometimes they even suggested sending the mother to prison".
- k) p50 line 17 "case conferences and ritualistic reviews,..... but the case conferences are often quite meaningless".

Guiding principles

4. Age of child

- a) p10 line 7 "an older child's history will always lie with his birth family and you can't sever it...and then if you destroy...take that bit of the child's history away, you're damaging it's ability to make a link with it's new family".
- b) When discussing contra indications for contact p11 line 21 "when it's a young very young child..say, under two or three".
- c) p13 line 2 "it's where the child's history lies and where the attachments lie.....even in adoption, a child sort of six, seven, eight.....we'll use that as the kind of area, I would still be considering contact".
- d) p29 line 8 "all teenage children need contact".
- e) p35 line 20 "in a lot of these adolescent cases children go home to parents who for a younger child you'd never allow, but you can't stop them. So it's the same thing with contact, they vote with their feet".

5. Safety

- a) p11 line 22 when discussing contra indications for contact “where the mother has , say, mental health problems or is itinerant or there’s an issue of violence, or a substance dependence, and there’s going to be unreliability”.
- b) p13 line 13 “but even say a parent had a kind of , a mental illness which rendered them incapable of caring but not incapable of loving, and if there could be a modicum of reliability, ‘cos reliability is significant as well, I would still consider contact”.
- c) p41 line 22 “I’ve always been prepared to consider it (contact) within limits, where there is a grave mental incapacity, substance abuse, any thing which is potentially detrimental to the child, no.....history of violence.....but where there is no reason to suppose that it’s going to be a barrier to the placement the answer must always be yes”.
- d) p43 line 15 “where the parent has been abusive or violent, and I’m not sure that the child should be exposed to that”.

6 Siblings are important (probably a subset of identity).

- a) p12 line 24 “I might recommend a child of six, seven or eight, because he had an older sib, should go on having contact”.
- b) p29 line 15 “ but they hadn’t even organised contact between the siblings....just couldn’t understand it “.
- c) When discussing placement of a sibling group, p30 line 7 “if the children were placed separately that contact was almost a given”.

7 Ethnicity/culture/religion as influential

- a) p4 line 6 “I do try to appoint racially appropriate solicitors where it’s necessary”.
- b) p25 line 22 “same race placement or cultural issues....I feel quite strongly about that, but I also feel strongly that I would rather see a child eventually placed than left in limbo because they couldn’t make a same race placement
- c) p27 line 4 “if there was a relative who represented that culture, I would encourage strong contact”.
- d) p28 line 19 “I’ve said that this child if not placed within the extended family needs to be placed at least with an Irish Catholic family that can understand and be sympathetic”.
- e) p28 line 25 “the cultural thing is very important to me”

8 Outcome studies/research

- a) p24 line1 “I read some outcome studies, there’s this wonderful, I mean there was Joan Fratter book and June Thoburn, I rely on that quite heavily”.
- b) p24 18 “the pragmatic approach taken by June Thoburn whom I regard very highly”.
- c) p25 line 4 “it’s not highly academic, but it’s what I rely on because for me outcome studies matter, what works matters”.
- d) p27 line 20 “you don’t use academic research, you use practitioner research.....and the BAAF stuff has credibility”.

9. Children’s wishes (hardly featured at all, except on a few occasions)

- a) The issue of respecting children's wishes whilst protecting them p34 line 12 "a fourteen year old girl who even tells me this week "So what if my mum's drunk, if I'm there I can look after her and I want to go home", and I say to her "Well grown ups need to make this decision and you are not going to see your mother unsupervised",...she hates me because her mother hates me".

Struggles/dilemmas:

1. Rather negative views of others I wonder how much this is linked to a sense of not being valued e.g. p2 line 14 "it's one of the ways the service functions, 'cos they rely on the goodwill of people either with retirement incomes or with second incomes.....it's not easy I would have thought , to bring up a family doing this kind of work".
2. Given her position on contact and identity the birth parents/family are very important, however she has a very negative view of parents whose children are placed away from them. For example parent are seen as damaging rather than children have damaging experiences, p23 line 2 "not putting a child with diff.....disabilities with a childless couple 'cos their need for a perfect child is so much greater.....an imperfect child".
P38 line 6 "who was brainwashing the child.....'cos the mother wouldn't let go".
P38 line 14 "this mother 'cos she'd been so hateful, spiteful".
3. p40 she summarises her theories, and is beginning to see contact as having different functions, but does not see the nature of contact as being different (contact at all costs) p40 line 1 "once you've decided it isn't rehab, the meaning of contact is to give the child a sense of their identity, and to maintain a link with the natural parent while being allowed to move on to a new placement".
She also grapples with the dilemmas of when contact is not safe p40 line 6 "and then that's compounded by the security.....the best arrangement of course is when both children are out and with their foster carers and both get on when they see one another,.....you like the informal arrangements".

Data summary : Tape 6 Expert 3

Themes.

1. Permanency and secure attachment as crucial.

- a) p5 line 21 "contact within which the parent can convey that they are not supportive of the child's placement is I think a contraindication for contact".
- b) p6 line 6 "if the intention is for this placement to be permanent , the parent must find a way of not conveying to the child that they are going to get the child back....contact can't...mustn't undermine the child's permanency".
- c) p7 line 2 "need for permanence and attachment are paramount.....then I think that there are situations where contact has to be sacrificed for the permanency and secure attachment of the child".
- d) p19 line 8 "contact has to be such contact that it does not convey a message other than the long term plan for the child".
- e) p20 line 2 "attachment and all that goes with it is completely paramount".

2. Contact as representing relationships/processes/reality/reassurance/denial (includes the idea of contact as having a symbolic function)Origins of roots may be subset and SYMBOLIC FUNCTION BEING HIGHER ORDER with reality vs denial and reassurance as subsets.

- a) p15 line 7 "the reason for that is partly curiosity and partly the dispelling of myths, 'cos children will construct their own pictures...and I guess on the whole realistic pictures are better than fantasised ones".
- b) p15 line 11 "the other consideration is for, certainly for older children, they need to know that their parents are ...as good as they can be, knowing about parents' welfare, because I think children get extremely worried about parents and not infrequently guilty about what's happened to the parent".
- c) p16 line 7 "I think this question of loss is very difficult 'cos I think we fudge the issue by wanting to sweeten the pill of loss, by having contact".
- d) p16 line 24 "there actually has to be a separation and a loss, I mean I don't think we can get away from the loss".
- e) p17 line 12 "a pseudo indicator for contact is to soften the loss, it's a contraindication".
- f) p17 line 23 "contact has to reduce in frequency.....to such an extent that it becomes a tangible change for the child".
- g) p18 line 12 "I don't think you can continue contact at the same rate if there's going to be a permanent move, because I think the child won't believe it".
- h) p18 line 6 "a ghastly reality..and the only way that they can begin to face it , and then deal with it is to reduce contact".
- i) p19 line 7 "contact has to be such contact that it does not convey a message other than the long term plan for the child".
- j) p20 line 8 "if there's going to be contact , the mother needs to become the equivalent of an aunt".
- k) p23 line 11 "for the parents contact sometimes, I think lulls them into a sort of false hope".

3. Guiding principles

i) Safety

- a) p4 line 20 “first of all contact has to be safe for the child and, you know, starts with physical safety, and goes on, you know, sexual safety and so on, but also emotional safety”.
- b) p5 line 4 “child protection at it’s crudest is the first basis”.

ii) The child’s views and wishes.

- a) p5 line 6 “I think that imposing contact on a child who doesn’t want it is, undesirable.....highly undesirable”.
- b) p5 line 10 “I don’t think I would advocate contact there and then if the child doesn’t want itwe need to explore why the child doesn’t want it”.
- c) p5 line 15 “I think to overrule a child , is another reason against contact, or rather the child has to wish it for contact to take place”.

iii) Alternative carers.

- a) p6 line 17 “there are times when the alternative parent’s wishes must take precedence.....contact has to be sacrificed for the permanency and secure attachment of the child”.

iv) Birth parents must support permanency/alternative parents.

- a) p5 line 22 “the parent can convey that they are not supportive of the child’s placement I think is a contraindication for contact”.
- b) p20 line 8 “the mother needs to become the equivalent of an aunt”.

4. Contact as important for origins/roots/identity.

- a) p3 line 6 “I base that on talking to children and indeed adults who have lost contact with biological relatives”.
- b) p21 line 3 “I’m thinking of adults who’ve been adopted I suspect that if they’d seen their parents from time to time, would probably have felt more complete, than not having done so”.
- c) p22 line 11 “this sort of curiosity about who our biological roots are”
- d) p22 line 23 “I think that the power of biology is overwhelming”.
- e) p14 line 24 “I think children want either now or later to know something about their biological relatives”.

5. Open mind.

- a) p9 line 17 “I never read files before I see everybody”.
- b) p9 line 23 “I can then say, I’ll hear your story and then I’ll read the files”.
- c) p10 line “we work from the general to the particular”:
- d) p3 line 16 “there seem to be rather polarised views.....at one end there is the pro contact brigade and on the other hand there is the anti contact brigade.....I mean I think some of these beliefs amount to prejudices”.
- e) p4 line 6 “I think the anti brigade is very much resource led rather than child’s needs led.....people who are pro contact I think sometimes ignore issues for the child, and are often based on the parents’ needs rather than the child’s needs”.

6 Eclectic model of assessment.

- a) p13 line 23 “I’m a complete unashamed, greedy, eclectic who takes from everywhere”.
- b) p14 line 6 “systemic thinking is certainly part of our thinking.....Attachment informs our thinking.....what stage of development the child is.....psychodynamic , undoubtedly informs one’s thinking as well”.
- c) p29 line 21 “we’re basing our thinking on a lot of assumptions which may or may not be proven”.

7. Struggles.

i) Age of child - less clear for younger children

- a) P19 line 20 “it’s quite difficult to argue for a very frequent contact for very young children, because you are building something into their lives, about whose purpose you have to be very clear”.
- b) p31 line15 “I don’t know why it should be more difficult with little ones than the older ones, I think that the older ones can tell you”.
- c) p32 line 6 “I think it’s the responsibility for the younger ones”.

ii) Unpredictability

- a) p23 line23 “I think we are sometimes asked to give an opinion about future plans which is completely silly because you cannot legislate in advance for years to come”.
- b) p24 line 5 “care plans are not accountable to anyone else”.
- c) p30 line 1 “it’s a bit like chaos theory, you give a little touch and it goes elsewhere”.

iii) frequency

- a) p30 line7 “I feel least certain about frequency....I think it’s the most difficult”.

General points : pragmatic vs theoretical

Data Summary : Tape 5 Judge 1

Themes:

1. The law as paramount in decision making/ Law is the guiding principle

- a) p5. Line 21 "it's not only I think their viewpoint but it really is what the law is and so, I think most professionals try to see if contact can be arranged"
- b) p7 line 18 "if we don't go through the welfare checklist we can be criticised by the court of appeal".
- c) p9 line 5 "judges have to play safe, really, by applying the act.....we're expected to say in every judgement that we have taken into account the checklist"
- d) p9 line 18 "the law plainly is, the law as interpreted by the court of appeal plainly is that contact is generally in the best interests of the child".
- e) p15 line 21 "the court of appeal judgement, that's the only check on my own performance"
- f) p15 line 18 "if I'm reversed by the court of appeal"
- g) p25 line 13 "you still get this question as to whether or not, at the end of the day, you should send someone to prison for failing to obey a contact order... I have done it but I've only done it once"
- h) p26 line 20 "I did it because the court of appeal said, in the end, if you make orders that are in the best interests of the children, you must try to enforce them".
- i) p32 line 5 "I must say, of course, I'm only going to apply the law".
- j) p32 line 22 "I've been more affected by appeals than anything else, not by what people said about me, if the court of appeal said I was getting it wrong that would influence me".

2. Contact with natural parents is in the best interests of the child.

- a) p5 line 18 "contact to a natural parent, is in the best interests of the child...that's the starting point".
- b) p9 line 18 "the law plainly is, the law as interpreted by the court of appeal plainly is that contact is generally in the interests of the child"
- c) p24 line 15 "anything that keeps parents in contact with their children must be for the overall benefit of children"
- d) p25 line 7 "we all want to be able to make contact orders" (because it's the law see 1 above or in interests of child?)
- e) p27 line 12 "the child's interests are to know both parents, its better to reside with the father and have contact with the mother than to reside with the mother and have no contact with the father".
- f) p6 line 22 "the very fact that the contact's being applied for generally indicates that the parent's got some interest in the child"
- g) p14 line 2 "when the child's sixteen, they invariably go back to their old family unit and seek them out, well, if that is right we would do better trying to encourage them to have some contact in the meantime".

Guiding principles

- i) Knowledge from past experience

a) p14 line 2 “when the child’s sixteen, they invariably go back to their old family unit and seek them out, well, if that is right we would do better trying to encourage them to have some contact in the meantime”.

ii) Child’s safety

a) p5 line 23 “only demur from that if they think the child is in danger...from having contact to a parent”

b) p28 line 20 “I wasn’t sure really how much the child was going to benefit from contact with a father who was maybe mentally ill, who might suffer more breakdowns.

iii) The Law (includes welfare checklist and that contact is seen as to be aimed for)

a). p7 line 13 “we have under Section 1 of the Children Act, we have a checklist of matters to which we must have regard”

b) p7 line 18 “if we don’t go through the checklist we can be criticised by the court of appeal”.

iv) Motivation and reality(includes degree to which arrangements have been thought through and degree to which these reflect genuine concern. Also includes ability to put child’s interests first (see next section on the needs of parents vs those of children)).

a) p10 line 18 “one is interested in practical arrangements....and in dealing with physical, and to a lesser extent, educational needs”.

b) p10 line 21 “and the effect of the change of circumstance, one does want to know what a husband is going to do (assuming its a husband) on a contact visit”.

c) p11 line 6 “you need to know what the parents thought about it...and with very young children, what arrangements are going to be made for meals, clothes changing, that sort of thing...transport...these are factors which I think are important”.

d) p17 line 7 “you make your decision not just on what people say in writing but of course how they respond in court”.

e) P17 line 10 “I’ve been doing a contact case today, and the father came across as calm and the mother came across as nervous and anxious and possessive, she was opposed to substantial contact....she’s not opposed to the principle of contact, but she came out of it the worst really, because he came across as reflective, and looking not just at his own interests but the interests of the child”.

f) p11 line 13 “if they haven’t really thought it through, if they’re seeking an order for the sake of it, that whilst you would still order a contact, it’ll be for quite short periods initially”.

g) p11 line 19 “you do query their motivation if they haven’t worked out the details...I don’t think that parents, whether they’re the residential parent or the parent seeking contact, always have worked out how emotionally demanding it is for everyone concerned”

v) Age of child

a) p8 line 8 “and I think it’s certainly true if you’ve got a teenage child...perhaps from an age of about eleven or twelve onwards ..who’s been implacably opposed to contact, it’s then very difficult to order it”

- b) p8 line15 “really, indeed, one has to say quite firmly that the suggested views of the child, say, five or six can’t be given a great deal of weight”.
- c) p8 line 19 “so the weight I give to each item on the checklist obviously does vary on the factual background of each case, but in particular the age of the children”.(nb compare with p7 line21 “I think the parties themselves tend to try and concentrate on the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the children concerned, but I don’t...I try to apply the checklist broadly”
- d) p9 line1 “I don’t think you can lay down guidelines and say, “I won’t take any notice at all of any wishes of children if they are under the age of, say nine and I’ll take an enormous amount of notice if they are above nine” because the act doesn’t say that”.

vi) Gender

- a) p32 line 13 “I know it’s said that I do favour men, as opposed to women”
- b) p32 line 18 “and I know it was said then that I favoured the men rather than the women....but at least I am conscious of it”.

4.The needs/interests of parents versus those of children or Parental/adult relationships as separate to those of children or relationship between needs of children and parents.

- a) p17 line 17 “I felt with her, that she was too obsessed with her general anxiety about the father.....and didn’t appreciate the importance of the child seeing the father”.
- b) p10 line 6 “the behaviour of the parents towards themselves is not something to which I pay much regard....because I think adults can be pretty violent and unpleasant towards one another without it by any means following that they will be nasty or unpleasant towards their children”
- c) p10 line 13 “We don’t look at their own past conduct”.
- d) p18 line 16 “and it’s usually left to the residential parent who may be the losing party to explain the decision to the child.....well, that’s not very good”.
- e) p19 line 15 “and those are often in cases where actually there has been violence between husband and wife, or violence exhibited in the past, in the presence of the child, and if the mother has a genuine fear, and if you think that fear is going to get communicated to the child...then, even if you think the fear isn’t really justified, you may say it’s in the child’s interests not to have contact”.
- f) p20 line1 “you have to try and distinguish those cases where the mother really has no rationale for her view and is simply being awkward... and those cases where she does have some rationale for her view and is simply anxious and troubled.....that will be reflected in the way she deals with the child”

5. Responsibility and accountability/Evaluation of outcomes/Monitoring performance.

- a).p9 line 5 “judges have to play safe”
- b) p9 line 12 “you do a balancing exercise”
- c) p12 line 16 “one actually doesn’t get any feedback... I make a decision, I may be taking a risk...there’s a risk element in all decisions”
- d) p12 line 22 “I don’t get any feedback in those cases when I don’t order contact, again I’m not told.....it’s an enormous weakness in the system”

- e) p13 line 4 “we hear these cases in private and no one has done any detailed research.....to see to what extent those orders are applied”.
- f) p15 line 8 “one of the judges difficulties is you never see another court in action”
- g) p15 line 12 “it’s personal trial and error”.
- h) p15 line 21 “the Court of Appeal judgement, but that’s the only check on my own performance....apart from self regulation”.

6. Adoption as different to other permanent placements.

- a) p29 line 5 “an adoption order is transferring the paternity of the child to somebody else...legally”.
- b) p29 line 9 “I think that those parents...the new parents, should have the opportunity of bringing up the child as their child, and the legal tie having been completely broken with the other parents... I don’t really favour that sort of contact”
- c) p29 line 16 “no social workers think that there should still be contact with the natural parents”
- d) p30 line 1 “it must be an awful strain on the adopting parents to feel “well this is our child now, in law, we have full responsibility for it.....but somebody, he or she might shoot off to the natural parents”.